Gun Gospel

by W. D. Hoffman

GUN GOSPEL

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W. D. HOFFMAN

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CHAPTER I

GRANGER HUME

PAINTED mellow red in the glow that lit the fire-tipped buttes beyond Loma Grande, a figure stood motionless at the corner of the high, thick adobe wall-fence. Grasped at the right hip, with even pressure of hand and finger muscles, was the fancy ivory stock of a gun, in which was a round medallion of a rearing colt; and protruding around the edge of the mud-brick enclosure was the scroll-engraved barrel, five and one-half inches long. In the left hand, at rest for the moment behind the wall, was an exact duplicate of the leveled pistol.

If one had been near enough to scrutinize Granger Hume closely, he would have seen a man in the early twenties, slightly under six feet, lean of hip, aquiline of face, eyes light, nondescript in color, keen as a blade. His features were russet-tanned even when the flaming sunset of this moment was absent.

He wore a steeple-crowned Mexican sombrero, a cape of deerskin that hung from his shoulders with long fringes, fringes that at times hid double holsters, belt and guns, without interfering with their use. His breeches were gray whipcord folded into high-heeled, brown calf boots edged at the tops with rows of silver five-pointed stars, big as a dollar. A dandy as to apparel, a figure at whom the señoritas and girls of the border ranges looked twice when he appeared in the hamlets of the Rio Grande.

The forty-fives in his hands were ornate things; Granger Hume took pride in his weapons. Both were triggerless, for the gunman had had the levers moved, the better to thumb the hammers in one motion; the knurling of the prongs was filed in each to make for speed, which was everything in the life of Granger Hume. His right thumb was brushing the hammer now, barely touching it, as he continued to hold himself motionless, muscles tensed, ears and eyes straining into the rapidly mellowing light of an eventful day.

With his left gun, he gestured to the youth behind him, a gesture that told the boy to go back and hold the other corner of the adobe fence. Little Brazos would understand.

Plainly, Granger Hume was not rushing matters; he would hold his ground here and await developments. There was no need for him to look behind; barren sand bottoms stretched a mile to the river, all open country, and Speck Ballentine would not

risk an attack from that direction. Somewhere behind the rectangular mud buildings that lay pink in the dying glow of day, Granger Hume knew Ballentine and his men were playing tag, from plaza to bolted door, from wall to fence, waiting an opening. The gunman chuckled inwardly at the thought. The Bull Mesa feudists were not taking unnecessary risks to make good their threat to drive him out of town. And there were a dozen men against these two—Granger Hume and the boy, Little Brazos!

The waiting gunman squeezed his Colt a trifle, as though in caress; he knew in how much respect the leader of the Bull Mesa faction held that weapon, and the man who used it.

Two there were—himself and Little Brazos—but another was on the way, from the Golden Eagle gambling hall. Veteran Dad Walker would not fail him, Granger knew. During the row at the Golden Eagle, when the feud had broken afresh, when Speck Ballentine grew bold and the two had exchanged words that meant that one or the other must die, Granger had succeeded in passing word to Dad Walker. Dad had answered with a glance. Since Speck Ballentine did not intend to fight alone, but had sent a hurried summons to his men, Dad would join his friend.

Little Brazos had quickly withdrawn from the gambling hall, and Granger Hume had sallied forth more leisurely, in the slightly leaning motion that was part of the man, his guns and ears and eyes

and muscles ready, awaiting Ballentine's pleasure to banish him from Loma Grande. Dad Walker had been detained deliberately by the oily Spaniard who cashed the chips, in some argument over money due. But Granger Hume was as sure as he could be of any one thing, that Dad Walker would join him: and he had given Dad his cue down at the south end of the long adobe corral by Elfego's *tienda*.

Dad Walker! Wonderful old blue-eyed veteran of many a pistol fight on the Rio Grande, man of iron, nerves of maguey rind, of she-bear courage no matter what the odds—Dad was guide, preceptor, god, to the one who now faced the Bull Mesa gang. Old Dad had brought him up, trained him to survive in a ferocious land, to triumph over cruel, hard-bitten men; had taught him all he knew about guns, made him do more with them than even the teacher could do. Dad would stick with him to the end!

Hence Granger Hume was not on the offensive, although ready for what might come. Dad would want to be in on the fun, would be grievously disappointed if Granger did not wait for him. Were it not for that, the aquiline-faced gunman would have fought it out alone, with only the boy at his elbow. As for Little Brazos, his understudy, it was as right for Granger Hume to give him his chance as it had been for Dad Walker to break in Granger Hume. Granger was only passing along the favor in the hard school of border combat.

The New Mexico sun had vanished behind the

fiery buttes, now rapidly graying. Dusk was hurrying. It would be well if Dad Walker arrived before darkness enshrouded the low adobes. Granger's lips curved in a grim smile as he reflected that Speck Ballentine was not rushing things, preferring darkness even with such great odds against the young gunman he feared.

And Granger Hume was not ignorant of the reason, for he had no false modesty. It was not to his liking, altogether, that he held the reputation of a killer; that was hardly just, for Gregor had sought to slay him, and "Fanner" Webb had run amuck and murdered another before Granger got him. But on the border such things are not forgotten, and even an accident may stamp a man as bad, and ever after that he must wear the brand that society has registered on the moral code book. One thing he knew—that no man from Loma Grande to the Pecos could reach for his weapon and make it talk as quickly as he could. But for that fact, Speck Ballentine would have risked the draw in the Golden Eagle.

Indigo darkness was settling over the walls beyond the blue dusk of the corrals. Suddenly the youthful gun-fighter's lips tightened, his eyes focused. Something moved at the west end of the adobe fence, as of a man creeping along from the Bull Mesa stronghold. Granger Hume made circular signs with his left arm, but he hardly expected to attract Little Brazos, so dark had it become.

The skulking figure ceased to move. Granger Hume's gun was on the spot in the indigo shadows where the prowler had been. Speck Ballentine was getting into action, stealing up to flank him under mask of darkness. Thus reflected the gun-fighter.

Again an object moved. Easily could Granger Hume have dropped the man; but he did not. And then suddenly the fellow acted. With a zigzag movement he dashed out into the open space of blue blackness. He was running, head down, Indian fashion, toward Granger Hume's hiding place. The youth in the fringed cape crouched almost imperceptibly, saw the feudist's drawn gun glint in the faint light; he noted the gangling frame, and marked the man as Speck Ballentine himself.

A spurt of flame from the adobe buildings smote the gunman's eye; his ears sang with the old familiar roar. The Bull Mesa men were starting their offensive, covering the advance of their leader. Granger Hume hesitated only for a trace of a second; his revolver barrel found the range by instinct, and the weapon barked in unison with a fusillade from the adobes.

Granger Hume's cheek stung with the spatter of bullet-driven dust from the dry-mud fence; he stepped out a yard to give himself play to meet the onrush of a dozen men. But there was no onrush. The fellow in front was lurching, his arms outflung; he staggered another step and sprawled at the feet of the gun-fighter.

Granger Hume's eyes searched the darkness, ready for the expected charge. He made a quick stride forward, in the inky blue shadow of the fence, to assure himself that the fallen man was not perpetrating a ruse. Gun covering the sprawled figure, he stooped to seize the man's six-shooter—he might need that extra weapon now. As his hand touched the service-worn old forty-five, something about the silent gray form shook him to the depths. He had a sensation of tragic ill. He stooped. The man was dead—and he was not Speck Ballentine!

In that instant Granger Hume realized the terrible truth. He had slain old Dad Walker.

CHAPTER II

A MAN DISARMED

THE young feudist rose slowly; a tremor shook his frame; weakening knees and flexing hands, nerve tingling, gave outward sign of his grief. But these were as nothing compared with the stab that reached his heart.

He had sheathed his left gun; in that hand he held the worn old forty-five of Dad Walker, with its zigzag notches cut deep in the walnut handle; in his right the ornate, scrolled weapon that had done this execution. A shudder ran through the hand and fingers that held the gaudy gun. For the time being all sense of danger from the Bull Mesa men had vanished. Granger Hume would almost have welcomed a fusillade of bullets now.

Dad Walker—good old Dad Walker, the big-hearted, kindly, courageous campaigner who had been a father to him—dying like this! Granger Hume did not stop to debate how the terrible mistake had been made; he realized fully that old Dad had come down to the corral to join him—loyal to

the last—had run into his foes, and had started to circle the mud walls, then suddenly cut across to aid the youth whom he always regarded as a son.

And that young gun-fighter had killed him; the hand and wrist and eye that Dad had trained so well had struck him down here in the near-darkness, without a chance for life.

The thought seared the brain of Granger Hume. Abruptly the gaudy gun that had done the execution dropped from shaking fingers into the dust. He did not stop to pick it up. Somehow that prized six-gun now seemed an unholy thing, something tinged with horror that he never wanted to handle again.

Slowly the gunman bent in the indigo shadow and laid his cheek against the old man's face, still warm. "I didn't mean to do it, Dad," he muttered, chokingly. For a long moment he held himself thus, and vainly his hand sought the warm flesh under the veteran's loose flannel shirt for sign of life. The movement ended in a caress. Granger Hume knew that Dad Walker would never quarrel with him again because he did not have the chance to mix in it when the guns were popping. What a devilish game this gun-toting was!

How often had he seen it: that those who lived by the six-gun died by the six-gun!

There was silence from the adobe walls, and the moon was thrusting its golden face over the eastern mesa-land. Oblivious to his danger, the gunman flung out his arms in a gesture of agony. Faintly

on his wrists were the outlines of two tattooed revolvers, marks he had put there in an hour of boyish fancy. They sickened him now.

Dry-eyed, Granger Hume rose. He backed away to the end of the long adobe fence, toward the spot where he had left Little Brazos. In a mental daze, physically dizzy for the first time he could remember, he went back and forth several times along the fence. The lad had gone; had either fled or been captured by the Bull Mesa gang.

The gunman moved toward the south side of the fence, where he had left his horse. Hand on the saddle-horn, he stood for long minutes, head down. Across the shadows of the corral, Speck Ballentine and his men were not in evidence; either they were hugging cover or had withdrawn. Granger's gaudy gun with the one empty shell lay on the ground before the slain Dad Walker; he had the veteran's old weapon in his holster, a new mate to the unused one of the ivory handle. The gunman had his choice—to continue the manhunt for Speck Ballentine, to kill or be killed, or to withdraw. The Bull Mesa feudist was not the man to listen to compromise, and Granger Hume desired none. Dad Walker would be looked after, given decent burial by the folks of Loma Grande.

"I can't kill a man—even Speck Ballentine—right now," groaned the gunman. His fingers continued to flex strangely and his arm shook at each recurrent thought of the swift motion that snuffed

the life of his last victim. He swung to the saddle of his little gray bronco, and made his decision.

"I'll go—and I reckon I'll never come back!"

For a moment he gazed back through the whitening moonlight toward the hamlet he had known, wheeled swiftly and rode east, a vision of the twin domes of the church his last picture of Loma Grande.

He jogged through the river bottom sands, skirted the unstirring cottonwoods that fringed the irrigation acequia. Striking out into the open mesquite away from the Rio Grande, he rode under the stars toward the desert bench lands. From time to time his hand touched the grooved wooden butt of Dad Walker's gun. His head hung low on the shoulders and his body slouched in the saddle. Presently he dismounted, picketed his horse, and slumped over beside a clump of mesquite, flattened himself in the soft sand, and gave way to his grief.

Through the night Granger Hume lay there. Daylight found him still sleepless, haggard, muscles strangely twitching. He rose hastily, saddled and rode north through the mesquite. Impulses that had come to him to turn back and face Speck Ballentine in Loma Grande he promptly stifled. It was some new motive other than fear, he realized, that was driving him away from the region where he was known as a gunman and killer.

Midday brought him to a country of giant, weird red and ochre earth formations, cactus, yucca, palo verde and deep arroyos. He had eaten nothing, had

drunk sparingly from his canteen. South, a short day's ride, was the booming city of El Paso; to the north, not far, he knew, were the Rotten Granite Tanks, where the cattle watered. Here the vaqueros of the Hernandez outfit had a line camp, and he counted on getting food there, enough to allow him to keep going. Beyond were the Ladrone mountains, and he would cross them.

Late afternoon brought him to the Tanks, nothing more than two earthen-banked pools of imprisoned water from the winter rains. On the edge of one of the lakes was a hut of yucca and wattled sticks, but he found no one about, nor was there any food. The cowboys had abandoned the line camp some days previously, judging from the condition of the hut.

He refilled his canteen with water that was fit only for cattle; it was better than none. After watering his horse, he lifted out Dad Walker's old gun and set out on foot to shoot a cottontail. The gun he held was an exact duplicate of his own, filed prong and triggerless, minus the ornamentation; yet when he shot at a cottontail he missed!

That was something new for Granger Hume. His lips curved into a cynical smile, and he took the left gun with the ivory stocks. When a jumping rabbit loomed in front again he fired. The little animal did not stop. Something was wrong with that gun of his. He tried it again, with the left hand, with which he was a trifle less expert than with the right. But his nerves were gone—or was

it that he had too many nerves, following a sleepless, grief-torn night that left him haggard and on edge? In thorough disgust, ready to penalize himself for his poor marksmanship, he went back and took the saddle, supperless.

Around the cactus-strewn bank of an arroyo a half hour later a horse and rider broke full upon him. Something in the attitude of the swart vaquero, in the narrowed black eyes that suddenly drew into gleaming horizontal lines, warned him that the fellow was off his own range. Granger Hume drew for Dad Walker's holstered gun, but before he had grasped the butt the Mexican had him covered.

"Leeft the hands, señor!" grinned the rider. "I weel trouble you for that gon!" He shoved his mount forward, lifted the weapon from Granger Hume's sheath. "Ah! another one!" he shot out, reaching for the gaudy left gun, and taking it. "Now, *ahora!* The monie, *dinero!*" The vaquero shrugged, exposing great horse teeth.

Granger Hume hesitated a moment, studying the man, self-pity and disgust at his own weakness overwhelming him. Unbelievable as it seemed to him, this outlaw of the range, skulking about for no good purpose, had actually beaten Granger Hume to the draw. And Granger saw that the man was implacable, cruel.

"Give me back my guns, and I'll give you a hundred dollars Mex," said the victim, spacing his words slowly. He drew out a wallet.

The vaquero grinned. "Bot I weel tak' the *dinero* anyway!"

"We'll get you for robbery, if you do."

That seemed to amuse the Latin immensely. He threw back his head and laughed. "O right!" He flung out an arm toward the uprising Ladrone mountains. "O right, you run from the sheriff like Luis Escobar—no! Leesten, hombre—you look for job?" His face sobered.

Granger eyed him keenly.

"You go see Señor Brogan—Meester Badger Brogan—no? He ees on the Jaramillo, twenty kilometers north. You no can miss heem, señor. You tal heem Luis Escobar send you, and it weel be o right!"

Vaguely had the name of Badger Brogan been spoken in Loma Grande, and dire things were said of him and his followers. Granger Hume evaded. "How about that swap—my guns for a hundred pesos?"

"O right!" The outlaw shrugged again. "Geeve me the monie!" He reached for it, took it. Breaking the cylinders, he threw out the shells, turned in the saddle and hurled the weapons across the bank of the arroyo into the dry gulch beyond.

"Yours, *amigo!* You-a see Señor Brogan!" Putting spurs to his horse, the Latin galloped swiftly down the wash.

Granger Hume dismounted, climbed the embank-

ment and found the weapons undamaged, in the sand. Coming back to his mount he leaned heavily against the animal's neck.

"Gun fever!" he groaned. "I'll never be able to use a gun again!" He looked at his hand and fingers, which seemed steady enough now. It was more than loss of muscular control that had slowed him up this time. Something in his brain cried out against him when he had reached to draw on a human being.

"Gun fever!" he repeated. "I'm through. It serves me right. I'm glad of it, deserve it. I've finished with guns. Maybe I won't kill any more Dad Walkers!"

He set out from the Tanks northeast, facing the Ladrones. In the foothills, hazy in the sun glare, was a cluster of faintly visible buildings, the Willoughby ranch. It would take hours' riding to reach them. Hunger gnawed at his vitals; there was no choice but to visit the ranch, although Granger Hume had suspicions that Bob Willoughby was in sympathy with the Bull Mesa faction.

Granger Hume rode the floor of the long arroyo, where the going was better. Suddenly he tensed at the sound of a loping horse, somewhere down the wash. He drew into a narrow side barranca, dismounted, brought his pony to its knees, then on its side, out of view of the approaching rider. Cautiously Granger Hume drew himself up to the crest of the embankment.

The horse swept by, and with it the gunman's eyes bulged, then swiftly narrowed. The strong features of the man in the saddle sent his blood racing. He uttered a strained whisper: "Speck Ballentine!"

CHAPTER III

A GUNMAN'S OATH

SPECK BALLENTINE was riding leisurely, his somber eyes focused toward the foothills of the Ladrones. He wore a chin strap that seemed to accentuate the long, morose features; his loose-brimmed hat flopped with the slight sway of his body in the saddle. At the right hip was the single holster and the big forty-five revolver that, in the past, had given good account of itself, although Speck Ballentine had never killed a man.

Granger Hume, fascinated, watched the rider take the curve of the arroyo, swerve with it northeast. He continued to crouch, rigid, unmoving. He had resisted the impulse to cry out to his old foe and to match him gun for gun. Now he beat back the urge to give pursuit.

"I'm a coward—a coward!" he moaned. "A girl!" He yanked back the long hair from his shoulders. Yet in his heart he believed he was doing himself wrong—something else seemed to be restraining him, some new chord in his being.

But he was afraid it was true that he had lost his nerve, because of the gun fever that had smitten him. "I'm yellow—scared!" he muttered, ferociously. "Hiding out here like a skulking Indian, when I hear a horse!"

Instantly he acted. He would hide out from no man. Springing toward his pony he called to it to rise, and flung himself to the saddle. He tore up the arroyo, seeking to overtake his hated enemy, to give him an even break, and risk battle. If the gun fever had him for good, he deserved the consequences.

But Ballentine had dropped from sight; he must have taken one of the parallel washes. Granger Hume wound in and out, up and down embankments, losing valuable time in pursuit. Concluding finally that Speck Ballentine was headed for the Willoughby ranch, he pressed the gray bronco on a straight course, riding for two hours without sighting his foe.

Sundown brought a brief vision of the Bull Mesa feudist on a high mesa jutting from the foothills. Then he dropped into another arroyo. Granger Hume pressed forward, nearing the brown buildings that hugged the graying hills. As the minutes slipped by and dusk fell, the gunman saw Speck Ballentine vanish among the adobes of the ranch.

Granger Hume had forgotten that hunger had been driving him to the Willoughby establishment since he left the Tanks; now, instead of halting to

await Ballentine's return he pressed on, entered the cottonwoods and cedars beneath the ranch house, and tied his horse to a tree. He would appear to be on an innocent mission seeking food, the two gunfighters would meet, and decide the issue.

Darkness had fallen swiftly. As the man in the deerskin cape neared the patio of the house he saw Ballentine's horse, reins trailing, silhouetted in the light from the windows. He drew up under an umbrella tree, beside a well, topped with a cool earthen olla which the gunman touched greedily, tipping it to his lips before proceeding. He dropped it back quickly at the sound of soft footsteps, behind him. Granger Hume's hand darted to his six-shooter, relaxed, as he heard the low tones of a girl's voice. Joan Willoughby, the seventeen-year-old daughter of Bob Willoughby, the ranch owner! And Speck Ballentine was with her.

Granger Hume had seen "Bob Willoughby's pretty girl" once or twice in town. She was young, too young, to have a fellow, he thought—at least one of Speck Ballentine's age. Yet there was no doubt, from the way they approached, that the leader of the Bull Mesa band was courting her.

To withdraw now meant discovery; to go the other way, toward the house, meant revealment also. Granger Hume disliked to be in a position of an eavesdropper, but he had no choice.

"Don't you love me, *querida?*" Ballentine was

asking, earnestly. "You have already promised to marry me."

"Promised—yes, if you would give up your guns," she answered. "Perhaps I do love you, but I can never marry a gunman, leader of the Bull Mesa gang!"

"*Niña!*" He drew her to a bench in the garden, near the tree that shielded his enemy. "Do you know what the Bull Mesa gang is? It is merely an organization working for law and order, helping the sheriff to drive out killers like Granger Hume. We are doing a public service, and folks in Loma Grande thank us for it."

"I do not know!" she declared, stubbornly. "All I know is that I want your promise to give up guns—quit shooting to kill people—before I will marry you. It is wrong. Thou shalt not kill, says the Bible. I could never—have you—touch me if I knew you had slain a man!"

For a time Ballentine was silent. Finally the hidden man heard his low pleading tones. "Joan, *querida,* I love you dearly—everything about you. But you'd shorely hate me if I was a coward and did not uphold my honor as a man. I'd hate myself, I reckon, if I didn't do that. Killers like Granger Hume are snakes; the community is blessed when rid of them. He insulted, humiliated, disgraced me, publicly, and I can never hold my head up again until I meet him gun to gun. I'll do anything, Joan girl, to win you—anything but sacrifice

my honor as a man. I can't lay down my gun till I've met Granger Hume. I'll wait for you, dear, and you can decide. You're going to school now, and I'll go to El Paso often to visit you. I'll trust you to wait. I know as you grow up you'll want me more if my chin is up and I'm able to look every man in the eye."

Granger Hume winced; his eyes went to the girl, who had risen. "I'll never marry you, until you have laid down your gun," she said quietly. "I cannot reciprocate your love until you come to me and tell me you have quit—those murderous weapons, forever. Daddy is in town, and you must go now!" She stepped quickly into the moonlit passageway and hurried through the patio to the house, passing within a few feet of Granger Hume.

Speck Ballentine stood gazing after her, his hands limp at his sides, a picture of dejection. Granger Hume's temples throbbed. As Joan Willoughby reached the gallery, his tongue thickened; the challenge to Ballentine unuttered. He stood as though weighted to the ground while the Bull Mesa leader turned and strode slowly to his horse.

A mocker sang in the dark, moon-silvered umbrella trees overhead; the door of the ranch house closed; there was the sound of water dripping from the sides of the shadowy olla on the rim of the well.

Still Granger Hume made no move. He saw Speck Ballentine rise in the saddle and dart off onto

the open range, an inky form in the silver of the plain.

"I don't reckon it was because I was afraid," argued the young gun-fighter to himself—"not because I had gun fever. No, I'm sick of guns. That little girl is right. Speck Ballentine, I reckon, is as much in earnest as I am—he thinks he is doing good, for the community, in fighting such as me. Mayhap he ain't as bad as he's painted. An' I can even see that he can't lay down his gun now, after the way I challenged him before the eyes of all Loma Grande."

He paused a moment longer looking toward the house, at a lighted lower window where the blue-dressed figure of a very young girl was bending over a book under an oil lamp.

"Speck's a lucky hombre," he mused. He looked up at the bright quarter moon and the near stars. "I, Granger Hume, swear I won't ever kill another man," he said, quietly.

Walking briskly toward his gray bronco a grim smile curved his lips, as though a great weight had been lifted. He mounted, and rode away in the night.

CHAPTER IV

A VOICE IN THE WIND

A WISTFUL, kindly-eyed man of thirty, taller than the average, his dark hair graying slightly at the temples, was hitching up the buckboard in front of the cook house. He was garbed in plain leather chaps, blue flannel shirt and big Stetson range hat. Parson John was in a hurry, having a double mission to perform in Toro town. For one thing, as free-lance range minister, there was a wedding service he must read—an infrequent job—and all the Parson knew about it was that some romantic lady had selected " high noon " as the time, and Nick Parsons' blacksmith shop as the place of meeting—to receive details. In addition to that urgent matter of business, Parson John, as handy man about the Fiddleback ranch, was scheduled to purchase and haul out one keg of nails and a few sundries, including tobacco.

Being in a hurry, and noting the increasing wind gusts of an approaching sand storm, the Parson

gave no heed to the beckoning gestures of the long-legged cowpuncher who sat hunched up in the cook house doorway. But when the other untangled his legs and scraped over toward him, the range minister looked up, ready for a genial pleasantry.

"Hello, Tumble, what's that you have now?" The Parson glanced at the tuft of yellowish grass the lanky puncher held in his fingers like a bouquet.

"Scaton-Sporobolus Wrightii," asserted the amateur botanist gravely, clicking his spectacle case and adjusting the silver-rimmed glasses. "I'd like to see you a minute, Parson John."

"See away! Sorry I haven't time to listen to a discourse on the eighty-seven varieties of needle grass."

"There are only twelve, of the genus Aristida—the Bromoides, the divaricata, the schiediana——"

"That what you wanted to see me about?" interrupted the Parson.

"No," said Tumbleweed, frowning, "I can see you're not interested, like you ought to be, Parson, you and I being the only intellectuals around here, and you just getting back from two weeks' vacation in the mountains without bringing in a single specimen. I was just going to remark that you'll likely want to stick in town a spell, Parson John. That dispute between Dick Carroll and Lonnie Hazen has come to an open ruckus."

The other turned about slowly. "Ruckus? How?"

"They're looking for each other."

Parson John's genial features had grown serious. He did not ask further questions; the details of that case were familiar to him.

"Thought I'd mention it," continued Tumbleweed. "Figured you'd sure be the only one that'd dare horn in. Seems like there ain't even a private shooting any more, since you brought your bedroll onto this range upwards of five years ago, let alone a range war. Looks like your preaching against guns wasn't stopping Lonnie and Dick, even if things are different. And you and I ought to stick together, Parson, being the only intellectuals. One of these days my book'll be off the press, with that special treatment of Festuceae and Hordeae——"

A burst of flying sand in the wake of a rising gale shut out further words, and in a moment Parson John was rattling along the dusty road, his mind engrossed in thought. He headed for Toro, windswept, sun-baked supply station on the edge of the desert range. The Parson hoped he would be on time to see Dick Carroll and Lonnie Hazen before the wedding.

Fifteen minutes later two horsemen loomed up out of the grit-laden air in front and the Parson heard the hail of Louie Neff, riding toward his ranch with his brother Gus. Louie jerked down the neckerchief from over his mouth and nose.

"Hyah, Pars' John! Jest back from yore fishin' trip? Ketch 'em all? Yeah? Say, hell's a poppin',

now, Parson, shore 'nuf, and yore record for patchin' up the big feud's goin' to the bow-wows—yeas sir! Jest when you get folks all gentled, things up and busts wide open——"

"Carroll and Hazen?" queried the man in the buckboard.

"An' Badger Brogan!"

The Parson's gray-blue eyes took on a strange glitter. "Badger Brogan?" he repeated slowly.

"An' his hull crew." Louie looked at his brother. "Eh, Gus?" The brother nodded.

"Who is Badger Brogan?" asked the Parson, innocently, although he knew considerable. "And why'd you reckon they call him that?"

"Th' same Brogan. Don't know if it's becose he's got a spotted, stripy face, or becose he holes in so quick. Th' same hombre, though, Parson, that busted through Toro town years ago and had a set-to with Dick Carroll. Half-breed. Half devil, half snake. It shore looks like he was goin' to settle old scores with Dick Carroll for that time Dick ventilated his lung. He's been holed in up in the Jaramillo country since, and if reports is true he's under a cloud, but nobody don't dast go get him. He's got too many hardware clerks——"

"That got anything to do with Carroll and Hazen's trouble?" questioned the man on the buckboard.

"That's what nobody ain't figured out. Looks mighty like Badger is goin' to throw in with Hazen.

Talk goin' around that he's goin' to take over the Lazy H."

"Lonnie Hazen goin' to sell?" quickly.

"That—or already sold!" affirmed Louie. "Well, yo're the on'y man round Toro that dast horn in, Parson John, and we hope you have luck."

"Thanks," smiled the Parson, and drove ahead.

Toro lay five miles north. Since the Fiddleback was handy to town, the Parson had chosen to work there, with Jes Mangel's assent, at his part-time avocation of range hand, giving him easy access to town on Sundays and on occasions of other rare ministerial duties.

Presently the buckboard was rattling through the teeth of the sand storm past the cluster of low flat buildings into the wide street, past scattering tin cans, whirling tumbleweeds, town corrals, vacant lots of sand and creosote bush, plaza and "business houses."

Toro, not even a shipping point, but an outfitting and supply station served by stage and freight teams, had been a bad man's metropolis in the old days, emerging from a Mexican hamlet to a day of glory for "wanted" white men, who thrived as rustlers, stage robbers, card sharps or sold whisky to Indians. Most of the buildings were adobe, a few of frame with high false fronts. Things had changed a lot in a dozen years—and a greater transformation had come about with the advent of the "he-man" parson, six years before. Toro was sleepy and quiet

now, outwardly, even if the old fires smoldered. It was small, boasting Jake Leach's hotel, two stores, harness shop, stage office and livery stables, Lee Jon's Oasis restaurant, carpenter, blacksmith and barber shops, four boarded-up saloons and *cantinas,* Full House bar, the Painted Pony pool rooms, and a few houses.

Parson John drove up to the hitch bar in front of the James Eads, General Merchandise, establishment, where a number of saddle horses were stirring uneasily in the cutting sand gale. Jerking a slip knot at the shiny wood rail, he strode off in his characteristic leaning gait up the board sidewalk.

He looked at his watch; it was 10:30. An hour and a half was a short space of time to see Dick Carroll and Lonnie Hazen and bring them together as he had done on one previous occasion. Besides, he was not certain both were in town, although the report that they " were looking for each other " indicated that they were.

Without appearing to have any object in view, he continued up the street, blue polka dot kerchief over his mouth to keep out the white grit that drove in gusts and swirls. He raised a hand or nodded at the few persons he met. Then he saw Lonnie Hazen. He slowed his steps, watching the bow-legged, short figure going into the office of Eli Becker, money-lender, land-agent, cattle buyer, and a little bit of everything, even dummy deputy sheriff.

Satisfied at locating the owner of the Lazy H,

the Parson turned and walked toward the Painted Pony, across the street, where he expected—and very much feared—he would find Dick Carroll. If the big boss of the Walking X was in town, the fact spelled very imminent trouble, unless Parson John would be able to add one more score against old-time feudism and for law and order.

As he reached the boardwalk in front of the Painted Pony, he saw the big cattleman in the passageway, going into the side door of Don Alfredo's pool hall. His holster, like that of Lonnie Hazen, swung low at the hip, and a gun projected in plain view.

At that instant words drifted down the wind, through the white haze of a sand cloud—words that made the blood in the Parson's veins run cold:

"Huh," said the voice, and it held a sneer, "the Parson of Toro town ain't nobody else but the gunman and killer, Granger Hume!"

CHAPTER V

"TALKIN' PERSONAL"

PARSON JOHN'S light eyes darkened slightly, hardened, shifted to the right and left; his booted feet did not stir on the curled, uneven boards before the Painted Pony. Not since he had come to Toro six years before had he seen a soul from Loma Grande. He had deliberately chosen Toro, one hundred miles away, across the formidable Ladrone mountains, isolated, self-sufficient, a law unto itself, wherein to remake his life according to the vision of service that vaguely came to him when he had looked back on the twin domes of the church on the night he slew his friend and protector, Dad Walker.

Not only had he kept the oath he had taken on that succeeding night at the Willoughby well; he had worked, studied, consecrated himself, wiped from mind all the hatred he had once held for his old enemy, Speck Ballentine. Burning with the passion to proselyte against the curse of guns and gunmen, he had come to Toro town where there was no

church, to establish one, in a crude way, without a congregation in the usual sense. Here men not long before had slain each other wantonly; there was no law save that of the bullet; and the cowboy-preacher had done much to eradicate the remnants of the old order.

These things rushed through his brain, with the fearsome menace of the words that told him someone in Toro town had found him out, endangering his rude ministry, threatening to undo what he planned for the future. For up to now the Parson had been a contented man, happy in his simple work. A job at spare times about the Fiddleback—Toro could not support a parson otherwise—a single meeting Sunday morning in the barn-like Painted Pony pool hall with the long wall bench as the only pew, a ready hand at infrequent weddings, rarer funerals, occasional cases of sickness and need—these engaged his time. Quarters at the Fiddleback bunk house, a back room for a study at the Painted Pony when he was in town, a few books, one saddle and bridle, a roan horse, a briar pipe, a cheery and sympathetic heart and a never displayed ministerial license—these were his possessions. There was one thing more that never figured in his new life, a dusty, stapled, locked and wired old box that contained mementoes of a sad and buried past, including Dad Walker's old gun of the notched, walnut stocks.

If Toro should learn of his true identity—! The

thought filled him with dread. He continued to look narrowly up-wind. He who had talked, argued, used diplomacy against violence, used ridicule if need be to brand gun dueling the play of boys, fools, or worse—he would not fit well in the rôle of gunman-killer, as this voice had branded him. His influence had come to be very great with the arrogant men of the range, whose first impulse had been to despise him. The Parson stirred uneasily. No one was yet in sight.

It was impossible to see fifty feet in either direction at that moment in the prolonged sand cloud that filled the street. The man who uttered the words might have been a hundred feet away, his voice carrying in the sweep of the wind. Parson John turned to go up the street, to see if he recognized the speaker.

Something struck his face. He reached out and snatched at it, saw that it was a broad, flat-brimmed hat with a narrow leather band. Out of the dust torrent a young woman came running, brown riding skirt flapping in the ferocious burst of the gale, her cheeks rose-crimson, eyes alight with surprise and merriment.

"Thank you—a good catch!" she cried, holding her blown hair with one gloved hand while she took the hat with the other. For an instant she smiled, and the Parson grinned awkwardly in return. He stammered something unintelligible, saw her turn

and go to the hitch rail toward a black saddle horse.

She was a stranger in Toro town, for the Parson had never seen her before. He had noted the fact. Noted also that she was young—early twenties perhaps—tall, slender, a brunette, with a face that radiated vitality and intelligence. When later her picture stayed with him, the Parson wondered if he had appraised her unduly because of the words that had come on the wind. There were other pretty girls on the ranges; and the Parson, although still young, had given them no thought.

As for the man who had uttered the pregnant words, the searcher was unable to find him after a cautious walk up and down the street and across to the other side. The wind had cleared a little. For the first time in years, the Parson moved about almost furtively, with quick, short steps, leaning slightly forward, eyes darting sidelong glances to the left and right. The feeling was not a pleasant one.

Trying to shake the fatal words from his mind, Parson John strode into the Painted Pony to seek out Dick Carroll.

"Hello Señor Parson!" greeted Don Alfredo, proprietor, bowing and smiling, tweaking his steel gray mustache. "Going to build a new church, I hear. Isn't this hall big enough?" The Spaniard laughed in good nature.

"I reckon we can get along for awhile." Par-

son John scanned the room for the cattleman. "Your hall's plenty big enough, and mighty kind of you to let us have it, Don Alfredo."

"It's the ladies—bless 'em—that are behind this new church move. Missy Leffenwell held a meeting while you were on vacation. Don't like to come to a pool hall service. A good-looking minister like you, Parson, ought to encourage the dears. So, say I, use the hall as long as you like, but if Missy Leffenwell persuades Dick Carroll and the rest to chip in for a church, let 'em have it!" Don Alfredo drew up his cape, preparatory to leaving.

"By the way, seen Dick lately?" queried the Parson, casually.

"He's back there with Soapy Johnson." The Spaniard gestured to a back room next to where the Parson had a shelf of books and a desk. He lowered his voice. "Heard about Dick and Lonnie?"

The Parson nodded gravely and walked toward the back room. As he reached the door, Soapy Johnson, Walking X foreman, Carroll's right-hand man, came out. Johnson was frowning; his face lighted when he saw the Parson; he uttered a friendly greeting, then went on.

Dick Carroll, erect, broad-shouldered, ruddy, whose immobile features fitted the term "poker faced," was moving to the door as the range preacher entered.

"Hyah, Parson," he droned, stiffening slightly

in defensive attitude. The squint eyes of the veteran cattleman seemed to say he knew what the Parson was about.

"Morning, Dick. How's tricks?"

"Nothin' out of the ord'nary, Parson. You ketch the limit of trout? Yeah? Doggone—soon's I c'n get a spell, I'm shore goin' up there. They see you about the new church yet? We-all are ready to chip in. Missy Leffenwell won't let me sleep, I reckon, till the thing's done. She's hankerin' after some'ers the women folks c'n go of Sunday evenin's, hear music, etcetery."

"Don't reckon I'll rush things, Dick. Never was a woman's preacher, you know. I'd like to have 'em, you understand, but dammit, Dick, I'm scared it would drive away the men folks. Unless you-all sign up to come to that new church if she's built, spite of women and song, I'll stick to the pool hall, Dick!"

They moved about idly in the little back room, addressing general remarks. Finally the Parson asked, in indifferent tone:

"Hope reports I hear ain't true, Dick, about you and Lonnie lookin' for each other."

Dick Carroll's keen eyes were level and unwinking. No one but Parson John would have asked that personal question. The cattleman ignored the other's hint to sit down when the Parson slid into a chair by the table.

There was something about these two men, each

in his way, that was masterful. As for the Parson, no one outside his bailiwick would have marked him as a man of the gospel—either from his apparel, the words he spoke in the range vernacular, or in the dark-hued, weather-tanned tone of his aquiline features. The other, who stood at the edge of the pine table, in easy lounging attitude, was obviously not the type of man willing to have another do his thinking for him.

"There ain't no use yore sayin' anything—this time—Parson," mused the owner of the Walking X. "I reckon you made me soft a year ago, an' I wouldn't have this thing to face now, if I hadn't listened to you then."

"It's something, Dick, that Lonnie has kept the peace for a year, don't you think?"

"On'y," rejoined the cattleman quickly, eyes contracting, "on'y long enough to let him bring in a nest of snakes from the Jaramillo country." His bitter tone softened somewhat. "I don't aim to be onreasonable, Parson, and I ain't blamin' you. Fact is, I've always taken a likin' to you, Parson, an' that's the surprisin' thing, because I hate preachers. Yo're he-man enough, range-hardened, as good as the next. But I reckon in affairs of this kind a man of the gospel can never get the right slant on things. I'll say again, if any preacher-man but you horned in on matters like this, dammit, I'd tell him to go to hell." Dick Carroll slowly produced the makings, his poker face directed on his listener.

"I owe yuh a powerful lot, Parson, what you done for Missy Leffenwell and all durin' that siege of sickness. But don't ask me to let Lazy H ride me any more!"

Parson John's eyes burned strangely; fires deep within them resented his friend's mild contempt for his calling, the assumption that the Parson was unequal to the viewpoint of fighting men in a threatened feud of this nature. But he checked himself, spoke in quiet, musical tones.

"I'm a parson, true enough, Dick, and maybe I don't sabe your way of thinkin'—and maybe I do! Lookee here, Dick! I've come to see you first because I picked the *big* man. In nature, it's always the big fellow that concedes most; the big dog overlooks the yelping of the pup, or there'd be war continually; the diamond-back gives warning, the sneaky sidewinder, little and mean, don't; the big lobo lets the coyotes snarl and snap their way on the trail; he don't have to. Ever notice it's the measly, weak stripling that totes guns most—it's the coward breed that shoots quickest, Dick. It's seldom the big man carries a chip on his shoulder. If you wasn't the biggest man in Plano County, Dick, I wouldn't come to you and ask you to make the first concession. It's the biggest hombre who can afford to buckle his holster flap first, Dick!"

The .owner of the Walking X smiled grimly "Sounds invitin', and yo're the smartest preacher with his argyments I ever come acrost. But yo're

wastin' good wind, Parson, talkin' to me. My mind's made up—I won't be rode any more, and I'm damned if I'll listen to any minister this side of hell, even includin' you! Beggin' yore pardon, on account of personal friendship, too, Parson." Carroll strolled toward the window, gazed at the dense whitish cloud that filled the street, sifting in at the window ledge.

"You won't listen to any preacher," repeated the other, slowly. "Dick Carroll's not goin' to be persuaded by any man that don't sabe this gun game. That it, Dick?"

"I reckon you've said it, Pars' John. Beggin' yore pardon, an' no hard feelin's. We're talkin' personal."

The Parson of Toro town stuffed his briar pipe into his tobacco sack and filled it. He leaned forward across the pine table.

"I'm goin' to tell you something, Dick—something that might undo my work here in Toro—and I want your pledge of secrecy. As you say, we're talkin' personal."

The grim-faced cattleman nodded in assent.

"You're not willing to listen to a preacher. You recollect anything about a hombre over in Loma Grande country some years back that was a lot talked about over the way he handled a pair of six-guns?"

"Granger Hume?"

"The same. Wasn't sure you heard about him over here in Toro town."

Dick Carroll grinned slowly. "I don't reckon there's a man between the Rio and Oklyhoma ain't heard tell of Granger Hume."

"I'm Granger Hume."

The words fell from the Parson's lips casually, without effort at dramatics. The big-hatted head of the owner of the Walking X moved slightly forward and his keen eyes searched the Parson's face, for the speaker's tone had been serious and matter-of-fact. Then Dick Carroll grinned.

"Yo're jokin', Pars' John!"

"I'm Granger Hume, Dick—and the world hasn't heard of me or my guns for six years. If a parson ain't qualified to ask you to make the first move to stop a range feud, Granger Hume's askin' it, Dick."

"I know you ain't the kind to lie, Parson, but——"

"Ever heard of any distinguishing mark about Granger Hume that folks hunted him by?"

"Wrists was tattooed, with guns on 'em."

The Parson removed his buckskin gloves, extended his wrists on the table. "Notice I always wear gloves, except when I eat, and then I'm mighty careful how I lay my hands!"

For a long moment the cattleman stood beside the table unmoving, studying the light, gray and blue flecked eyes of the slim man opposite. The gale

moaned, whistled, shrieked around the eaves of the old frame building. Carroll shrugged, spoke:

"Parson, you do me one favor, and I'll make the first overtures to Lonnie and run the risk of bein' branded a coward again, on yore say-so."

"What favor you askin'?"

"Come over to the Walkin' X—any job open from assistant foreman down."

"That the only way you'll listen to reason?"

"Yea, an' I'm yieldin' more'n——"

"Right; you're got my rope, saddle and roll. Why are you askin' that, Dick?"

"I don't reckon Lonnie Hazen an' his friends, including Badger Brogan, will make peace with the Walkin' X even if I make all the overtures in the world."

CHAPTER VI

A MAN FROM THE SOUTH

WHEN the Parson hurried from the Painted Pony a few minutes later he had qualified his acceptance of the job at the Walking X with the warning to Dick Carroll that he was not hiring out as a gun hand; that he was no longer Granger Hume; that a preacher could not be expected to engage in any factional feud. He had reminded Carroll of his promise to keep secret what had been revealed and he knew he could trust the cattleman implicitly in this.

It was now after eleven; he had no time to lose if he was to see Lonnie Hazen before the wedding. As he walked briskly up the street toward Eli Becker's office, the cutting sand wind reminded him again of the words that had come through the gale. They filled him with a certain intangible dread. True, he had revealed the truth to Dick Carroll, in a desperate effort to avert a war. It would go no farther, there. But an unknown peril is always more menacing than a known one.

Reaching Becker's office, in a low, one-story, plastered adobe with two deep-set, barred windows facing the street, he opened the heavy oak door. There was something significant in the presence of the Lazy H owner in the office of the money-lender and land-agent; the smooth-tongued, bald-headed Swiss acted as clearing house for such real estate transfers, abstracts, etc., as the country occasionally required. The Parson recalled what Louie Neff had said about Hazen selling out the Lazy H to the unsavory Jaramillo chief, Badger Brogan.

Becker was out. Lonnie Hazen was at the money-lender's desk examining some papers.

"Howdy, Lonnie. Where's Becker?"

"'Lo, Parson, how's the trout? He jest this minute went down to see Carroll 'bout that boundary line dispute."

"Lonnie," said the Parson, coming to the point immediately while Hazen was alone, "you know Dick Carroll, no matter what his faults, is no coward."

The ranchman turned on the swivel chair, his bowed, booted legs clear of the desk, his black, suspicious eyes narrowing. "He's a plain, ornery, onmitigated skunk. You kin tell him I said so, Parson John."

"I said he wasn't a coward."

"What you aimin' at?"

"Dick's agreed to make the first move, meetin' you half way—more'n half way—to end this trouble.

He's put up his gun, and I'm askin' you to do the same, Lonnie."

The owner of the Lazy H sat stiff, eyes seachingly on the Parson. "Huh," he grunted, after a time, "you been talkin' to him, Parson—yore hand's in this, eh?"

"Yep. Dick agreed to patch up the line dispute, according to law, if you're agreed, Lonnie."

The cowman shifted uneasily. "What about all that talk he's been makin' about losin' stock to the Lazy H? I'll tell yuh somethin', Parson. Th' Lazy H has lost two head to every one th' Walkin' X has lost, in the last year, and you ain't heard Lonnie Hazen squeal an' layin' it onto Walkin' X, have yuh?"

"You tellin' me straight, Lonnie?"

"Yeh, an' that ain't half quarter. The line dispute don't figure in this as much as Dick Carroll makes out. There's plenty water on the crick above where I put that fence, an' I'd never fenced it in the first place if it wasn't for his talk. I'll tell yuh somethin' else, Parson. There's been cows rustled off the range from both outfits. When the Lazy H lost, I didn't go talkin' around blamin' Carroll, did I? What does he do? Come over an' talk it over with me an' hear my grief? Not any! He's mighty prompt to brand a man, Dick Carroll is, an' now I reckon he'll get his belly full. Let's see how he talks when Badger Brogan's men ride herd on the Lazy

H!" The cowman swung on the swivel chair; laughed dryly.

"What you mean by that, Lonnie?"

"I'm sellin'. Fixin' up the final papers now." He tapped folded sheets of paper on the desk of Eli Becker.

"Far's I'm concerned," continued Hazen, "if Dick's put up his gun, he's safe. In one more day I'll be out of the ranch business. I figured I had a score to settle with Carroll, him stampin' around and talkin' his head off, and I wasn't goin' to let him pot me without eatin' lead when he done it. That's all there is to this gab, Parson. You kin tell Carroll he's safe, since he made the first move. After Monday, let him deal with the new owners, Badger Brogan and his two *amigos,* Jerry Gore an' Luis Escobar. Mayhap he'll find out what a peaceful, mild, gentle, orderly neighbor he had!" There was a hard grin about Lonnie Hazen's lips.

"You figure they'll make trouble?"

"They won't run from none."

Parson John filled his pipe, held a match to it slowly. "I'm certainly obliged to you, Lonnie. You won't regret bein' big enough to play the man. Dick ain't as bad as you've been led to believe; he's not the kind to shoot off his head, much. Anyway I'm mighty glad to count you for a friend, Lonnie, and if ever I can return the favor, sing out."

The cowman grinned, while the Parson left the office with mingled feelings of elation over the truce,

and of deep concern over the veiled threat in Badger Brogan's appearance on the Toro range. He risked being late for the wedding to hunt Dick Carroll up with the news that Hazen too had put up his gun.

It was ten minutes to twelve, and the Parson hurried over to the blacksmith shop, where Nick Parsons, sweaty, grimy, scarlet-faced, was bending over and swearing furiously at a quivering, jerking mass of muscle, tied by all four feet. The bronco's fire-red eyes and sweeping five-foot tail were still able to voice defiance at the burly, bare-armed figure above him.

"Meanest gol-danged critter I ever see!" gasped the blacksmith, as Parson John entered. "I'll bust his damn bitin' jaw if——"

"Where's this town wedding and who?" broke in the Parson. "Time's short—Pete brought word to see you here."

"Ain't goin' to be no weddin'," grumbled Parsons, wiping his reddened, dripping forehead with his bronzed forearm.

"Somebody make a mistake?" The Parson grinned. "Who were the parties to be?"

"I was." The blacksmith saunted off toward the back of the shop, beckoning the other, who followed through the sooty, dark interior, strong with the smell of smoke and burning hoofs. "Yuh see, it's all off." Parsons hoisted a heavy jug of liquor from a corner, extended it, tipping it to his own lips when refused. "First I drunk in a year," he

gurgled. "I'm goin' to drink a bar'l. We had a ruckus. I says: 'No high noon weddin' fer me, with the hull town lookin' on.' She says: 'No elopin' fer me, with nobody lookin' on.' We're split up, that's it—split up!"

"Who is she; where is she now?"

"Over to the store with Mistress Fields."

"You come along!" snapped the Parson, pulling his watch. "Just five minutes left. You—like the lady don't you?"

"Uh huh—no, I don't!" They argued; the Parson got additional information. He literally dragged the big blacksmith across the street, into the store, where they found the bride-to-be in the living quarters of the proprietor, in tears. Mrs. Emily Edson Jenkins was ready, in a filmy white dress, nose and eyes red, in despair. When she saw Parson John and Nick Parsons she literally flung herself on the blacksmith, and as quickly recoiled, in angry shrieks and sobs, at the tell-tale odor of whiskey, and the grimy, black hands, arms, face and clothes of the bridegroom. Parson John pulled his watch. "Two minutes. Nick, you get yourself fixed up. I'll set back the watch a half hour!"

Nick joyfully went to work, borrowed a suit of Dan Fields' clothes, scrubbed himself, and with the necessary witnesses the couple and the minister hurried to the "parsonage" back of the Painted Pony, where they were married, technically, at high noon; and Nick promised to smash his jug of

newly-purchased liquor over the cranium of the outlaw bronco that lay trussed meanwhile on the blacksmith shop floor.

"All in the day's work," mused Parson John as he hastened out into the gradually subsiding sand storm towards the Ead's general store, where the Fiddleback did business. After purchasing the keg of nails and a few miscellaneous articles, he hoisted the heavy keg and lighter box of supplies to the buckboard, fed his horses, and went into Lee Jon's restaurant, next to Jake Leach's White Man's House.

Since it was Saturday, and the Parson had promised Dick Carroll he would have his saddle and bed roll at the Walkin' X Monday morning, he planned to return to the Fiddleback and explain matters to Jes Mangel. While his resignation would be a simple matter, since his job there was a sort of work-as-you-please arrangement, he wanted to have it over with. But during the meal the mysterious voice he had heard in the wind troubled him, and he decided to linger in town awhile. The mysterious accuser might make himself known.

But an hour's loafing around, chatting with this one and that, brought no developments. The Parson concluded his business in town, saw Lonnie Hazen and Eli Becker join Dick Carrol in a business conference, smiled broadly, and climbed up on his buckboard.

Twitching the lines, he heard a hail and the clip-

clop of hoofs. Dick Carroll had finished his conference, was riding toward him. Just behind the cowman the Parson saw the girl in the broad tan hat—the same that he had retrieved a few hours before. She was riding a fretful, gleaming black horse, with the grace of a girl born of the ranges.

" Parson, we're countin' on yore ridin' out with us to the Walkin' X for supper, and a little gatherin' follerin'. In the excitement, this mornin', I plumb forgot to mention Missy Leffenwell charged me perticular to bring you along to talk church plans. Parson John, meet Miss Joan Willoughby, my niece. Don't you say yuh can't come, now—— "

" Glad to meet you, " the Parson returned the girl's bow, which she accompanied by a witching smile of recognition. He masked the start which the name had given him. Could she be the daughter of Bob Willoughby, the very young girl who had been the fiancée of Speck Ballentine six years before? If so, she had changed a lot. Parson John turned to Carroll.

" I'm sorry, Dick. I've got those nails, needed at the ranch, and then there's that resignation—— "

" You'll have tomorrer, an' they won't need them nails on Sunday, " grinned the cattleman.

" I'm scared that's when they'll want to use 'em, " laughed the Parson.

" Well, Missy Leffenwell's sot on seein' you, an' I promised. I seen Tumbleweed awhile ago, and he c'n take out the nails. There he goes now! " Dick

Carroll swung about, stepped his mount across the street.

"We're so anxious to have you," said the girl simply. "Miss Leffenwell has written a lot about your—work. You'll come, won't you?" The little twist to her curving lips, breaking into a smile, made her plea hard to resist.

"Well, mayhap, Miss Willoughby, if Tumble'll ——"

Carroll swung up. "He'll take the buckboard; you take his hoss."

"Hello, Parson—you go right along," grinned the lanky cowpuncher, leading over his pony, clutching in his left hand a bunch of range herb specimens. Tumbleweed had yielded to the temptation to come to town to see the shooting, if there was to be one, but had not neglected his botany. He was introduced to the girl and climbed to the buckboard as the Parson stepped down.

"What have you there, Tumble?" questioned the Parson, out of the goodness of his heart giving the other an opportunity to show his erudition.

"Zygophyllaceae," pronounced Tumbleweed promptly—"related to the creosote bush family, only not a shrub, but a trailing herb; calyx of five sepals. I ain't sure if it's Tribulus or Kallstroemia ——"

"Looks like plain weed, sand bur," grinned Dick Carroll. "Where in blazes you pick up all that learnin', Tumble?"

"Ridin' in the saddle, mostly, studyin'," replied the puncher seriously, snapping his spectacles case, adjusting glasses carefully. "Now, the difference between sand bur—— "

"Much obliged for takin' the nails, Tumble."

"When'll I tell the old man yo'll be back, Parson?"

"Tomorrow, but I'm leaving the Fiddleback Monday, for the Walkin X."

Tumbleweed's jaw fell. "Leavin'?" he repeated, gazing from one to the other. "Leavin'—for the Walkin' X?"

Dick Carroll and the Parson nodded.

"Mister Carroll, have you got a peg for my saddle over at the Walkin' X?"

"Why, yes, if it don't cripple Jes Mangel none. You ask him."

"Wherever Pars' John goes, that's where I hang out," asserted the puncher, eyes wide and earnest. "The Parson's a white man, Mister Carroll, and he and I have been the only intellectuals at the Fiddleback, and I'm glad to see you givin' recognition to real brains, Mister Carroll."

"All right, Tumble," laughed the cowman, and the three riders left him and continued up the street.

At the end of the thoroughfare Carrol and the girl drew rein, as though expecting someone, and the Parson followed suit. In a moment a rider swerved from the plaza past the Full House saloon and spurred toward them. He came at undiminished

gait until fairly among them, then drew up with a jerk that might have broken his horse's jaw. The rider was a tall, big-Stetsoned, big-spurred, big-holstered young man, strong of feature, square-built. His small mouth held a hint of cruelty. The Parson's eyes narrowed, as though he had seen that face before. But he was not sure. He was introduced to Carl Gains.

The Parson learned that Gains had just arrived in Toro from the south; he had come part way with Joan Willoughby, by stage; had met her while the girl was traveling north to her uncle's ranch from school in El Paso. Gains and Miss Willoughby seemed to be very companionable.

The Parson looked at Gains often, trying to place him. He recalled the words he had heard in the sand gale. Gains was the only stranger in town, apparently, and his voice held a drawling tone like that which called the range minister Granger Hume.

But of these surmises the Parson was not sure.

CHAPTER VII

KING OF THE JARAMILLO

ON that Saturday afternoon, while the sand wind howled with slightly abated fury, and while the Parson and Dick Carroll's party rode north toward the Walking X, a band of newcomers jogged into Toro town.

"Like a parade," remarked Hip Hipkins, veteran Walking X buckaroo and horse-breaker, behind the stained, narrow-paned window of the Full House saloon. Hip, who boasted a weak heart in spite of his strenuous, body wrenching vocation, had been imbibing rather freely; his heart needed it, according to his own admission.

"Or a funeral. It shore spells trouble on the range." Tramer, fellow puncher, shrugged, turned and sauntered slowly out the rear door.

"Huh! A holdout in this game some'ers." Hipkins addressed the quiet, mild-eyed cowman standing behind him, gazing through the window at the dust-laden cavalcade. "What you think of this-all, Jedge?"

"That," replied Judge Loftus, stroking his sparse soft white goatee, "that depends on futuh events. Bah Double L doesn't pass prior judgment, and it's ce'tainly a wise waddie, Mist' Hipkins, that keeps a still tongue in his haid."

The horse-buster was working his fingers. "Fourteen, fifteen, eighteen, twenty-one!" he counted. "If that ain't as orn'ry a lookin' crew as ever you seen, Jedge, from Badger down—then I don't know hawses!"

Zig Tinley, dusky as an Indian, lame in one hip where a horse trampled him, limped forward, stuck his head between them. "Is it a fact, what we're seein'," he jerked a thumb toward the riders, "or are we all plain drunk?"

The cavalcade swung up toward the elevated sidewalk in front of the White Man's House, across the street, two doors down. "Which is Mist' Brogan?" queried the southerner, as others crowded in behind him.

"It's the runt drawin' up in the lead, with the rattlesnake haid," informed Hipkins, and edged out from the crowd. Having had one drink too many, the buckaroo shoved through the swinging doors and started across the street toward the drink emporium that was holding the interest of the Jaramillo men. Judge Loftus—he had been a real judge sometime, somewhere down south—did not follow, nor did others in the Full House.

"He's goin' to wrangle hisself plumb into

trouble," said a puncher, and that was the general consensus of opinion.

"Whisky'll git him yet," opined another, as Hipkins weaved his way among the horses at the hitch bar. "If that's the king of the Jaramillo, Walkin' X'll need some guns."

"I'm a crack roper," insisted Zig Tinley.

"So'm I." Bill Minter twisted his beefy shoulders. "Who's the Mex?" pointing to a swart rider in silver-belled sombrero and gold-braided *chaqueta.*

"Louis Escobar. Second meanest to Badger. Lookit him! Shows his teeth like a tarantaler." Duffy Butler spat in disgust. "Me an' Hip has seen them two, an' that red-faced lobo on the end. He's Jerry Gore. Meaner'n Satan, but third meanest to Badger an th' Mex. We ort to git Hip out uh that."

"You go. I'm lame," suggested Tinley.

"Let him go! He deserves it."

Hipkins, alone of all the idlers in town of a Saturday afternoon, was sauntering up and down the boardwalk staring at the Jaramillo outfit. His vision was clear and his mind amply comprehending. The first few of the riders had dismounted; others were moving up. Hipkins appraised them, their wiry little range mounts, well-conditioned, crunching ornate saddles, stirrups and trailing tapaderos, braided, silvered bridles—the equipage of range aristocrats.

Badger Brogan's men were severally burdened with heavy, well-filled cartridge belts and holsters bulging with hardware; they rode with the easy grace of men born to the saddle, severe, hairless chaps, straight up and down in the stirrups; their big hats were turned and curled with much weather, in most cases banded down under the chin; mufflers were worn over faces in the equinoctial wind. Here and there was a steeple-crowned Mexican sombrero.

As they swung down in silent succession and tied their mounts at the rail, neckerchiefs were lowered, a few brief words were said, and they wobbled up in pinched narrow boots, an assemblage of predominating bow legs, tall men and short men, toward the White Man's saloon in the wake of Badger Brogan.

Hipkins scrutinized their faces. Ready to believe much, and emboldened by liquor, he none the less recoiled and shuddered. Hard, scarred, deeply lined, wolfish features bespoke warped and embittered men. Badger Brogan had gathered into his fold much of the scum of the desert from the Rio Grande to the Pecos. Varied were the types, but they agreed in their harshness, their predatory bearing, their animalism.

"That's the downrightest, cussedest bunch I ever laid eyes onto," mused the Walking X buckaroo, and squinted toward the runty figure of the band's notorious leader.

Hip had seen Badger Brogan twice before—during the Renshaw-Travis war, and once in the Coney

Island saloon in El Paso. The last seven years before, but whisky and bad company had not changed Brogan any for the better. He was a study in warped physiognomy; without being deformed in any feature, hate had distorted all. The snug strap under the lean jaw accentuated the lines running vertically from eyes to neck. The wide, tight mouth drooped at the corners; the eyes, deep set, were amber, burning, shifty, suspicious. His skin was mottled, mulberry spotted. Something about the rear view of the head, straight up like a board from the neck, gave Hipkins the exaggerated impression that he had the head of a snake.

Yet certain women fancied the king of the Jaramillo—perhaps it was his strength—and even Hipkins saw mastery in the small man who could dominate such a band of hard-bitten men of the desert.

"For the good of Toro town, I'm hopin' Badger don't linger here more'n overnight!" the Walking X puncher reflected, and sauntered on into the White Man's bar in the very midst of the invaders.

He saw Brogan, in tanned, bat-wing chaps, waddle over to the bar, turn and beckon to the others, then pass a low word to Jake Leach, serving at his own bar. Drinks were poured and drunk in silence, in irregular order. The Jaramillo chief turned, spoke in quick low tones to the red-faced Jerry Gore, his chief lieutenant, and strolled out of the place, leaving his men to their own devices.

Hipkins walked to the end of the bar, exchanging a swift glance with Jake Leach. After a moment the proprietor came his way. "How, Hip! Hyah?"

"Heart ain't none too good today——"

"A little juniper berry'll——"

"What I was thinkin'. Gin." Hipkins leaned close, whispered. "What Badger say, Jake, when he left?"

Leach's pale eyes rolled; the Walking X hand was an old friend and a steady customer. Jake returned the whisper: "Told 'em not to start a ruckus!"

That seemed to Hipkins significant. He continued to linger before his heart-tonic removed not five feet from the Jaramillo line. No man accosted him, said a word, invited him to drink, quarreled with him. That too was surprisng.

Outside, Badger Brogan was striding briskly through the gusty wind, crossing the street to the plastered adobe office of Eli Becker. The money-lender was waiting, had noted Badger's arrival. Becker was bent over some papers, scratching his bald head, appearing very busy. Lonnie Hazen was standing beside him. The Jaramillo chief entered unceremoniously.

"Four o'clock sharp," he grunted, glancing at the clock on the wall. "Papers ready?"

"All retty, Meester Brogan!" Becker rose, bowing unctuously, extending a large flabby hand. "Meester Hazen iss retty likevise. You haf the money, Meester Brogan?"

The Jaramillo man drew out a wallet, fat with bank notes, and flipped off an even one thousand dollars. Hazen stared, and his Swiss agent smiled, turned pitying eyes on Brogan. "One t'ousand," he repeated. "There iss some mistaig. The price vas t'irty t'ousand, vit ten t'ousand gash down." He stroked his great hooked nose.

Badger Brogan grinned. "Ten thousand in thirty days. This pile is practically option money, to apply on the price. That was my understandin', or I'd never rode acrost the Ladrones." His eyes held a hard glitter, and the mottled skin drew taut across his face. Hazen and Becker exchanged glances. There was no choice; the newcomer had agreed to a big price; Hazen's wife and daughter wanted to sell, due to increasing bad blood between Hazen and Carroll.

Brogan would not come up a dollar; he showed his restlessness by increasing ill nature. Finally Hazen gave assent to change papers, which soon were signed. The Swiss agent breathed easier, and his eye left Badger's wicked-looking gun.

"That's done," grunted the purchaser. "I'll keep most of yore hands, except the Mexes, re-arrangin' jobs. My men move in the mornin'."

"Most of my men are leavin' today," declared Hazen. "I counted on you bein' prompt and on the minute."

Badger Brogan showed small, sharp teeth, chuckled meaningly. "I don't want yore hands that

don't want to stay," he said. "I got plenty of my own, but I aim to use some extrys. Lot of stock comin' in."

Lonnie Hazen and the Swiss were silent, sensing it would be better to let Brogan volunteer his own information, about that extra stock. They guessed it might be coming across the Ladrones, from Jaramillo way. The purchaser did not enlighten further.

"We stay in town tonight," he said, stressing the words carefully. "Ain't even ridin' out to look at the outfit."

"Plenty of room at the Lazy H," suggested Hazen.

"We don't go out till mornin'," the Jaramillo man repeated, gazing from one to the other. "One other thing. Yuh may hear talk; Badger Brogan didn't usta be crazy pop'lar round here—with certain gents. But he's got friends, aplenty, and his credit's good. He figures that you two gents are his friends, too." He studied their faces through narrowed lids.

"Ve are proud of the honor!" affirmed the agent, loudly, scenting possible future commissions, while Lonnie Hazen nodded understandingly. The cowman had a suspicion that Badger Brogan had had a hand in the persistent raids on his stock; this more than the threatening attitude of Dick Carroll had coerced him into selling. Now that the deal was made, he was willing to adopt a hands-off attitude. Brogan pocketed a copy of the contract.

" I come through west, past the Fiddleback, and seen Jes Mangel. He knows the Lazy H will be friendly, and he's sidin' with me; leastwise, he's neutral. That's all I ask. Understand Judge Loftus is in town; where's he at?"

Becker had risen, thumbs in his vest pockets, facing the other in chummy, ingratiating attitude. " He iss eidder at the Painted Pony or the Full Houze, Meester Brogan."

"Hasta luego, amigos!" The Jaramillo chief strode to the door and out into the street. A few minutes later he was talking to Judge Loftus in a quiet corner of the Painted Pony while those in the big room cast surreptitious glances in their direction.

" I'm wantin' yuh for a friendly neighbor," said Brogan.

" Don't reckon yo' and I'll clash, Mist' Brogan, as long as yuh let Bah Double L alone," replied the judge, meeting the little man's deep-set, sinister eyes.

" That's all I'm askin'. I've seen Mangel, and the Fiddleback's neutral; I've seen you, an' the Bar Double L is the same. I've bought out Hazen's Lazy H. The Neff boys want to see me—reckon they want to onload. Which means all the big outfits are hands off, an' if Walkin' X wants trouble, Badger Brogan kin handle Dick Carroll aplenty. *Adiós,* Jedge!"

The Jaramillo leader clumped out through the door, up the boardwalk and into the White Man's saloon, where he joined his companions. For the

first time in many days he issued an exceedingly unpopular and unalterable order:

"One more drink, all around, *and only one!* Then we set down to chuck an' Jake will feed us on the fat of Toro town. This Saturday night after supper we stick to the hotel, to a man. There ain't goin' to be no ruckus in this man's town account of Badger Brogan's men on this first night. Sabe?"

Every man understood. Gore and Escobar scanned the leader's features for some explanation, which was not forthcoming, just then.

"We bunk in the White Man's House for the night," enlightened Brogan, a little later. "If Jake ain't got beds enough, we sleep on the floor."

Still later Brogan conferred with his two lieutenants while his other followers sat at cards, sulked at their cigarettes, or grumbled at their chief's unusual order.

"Us three takes the down-stairs room, and the rest of the waddies the two big rooms," explained Badger, as the three sat in front of a pine table in a side booth from the barroon. Brogan produced a flask of whisky for the three. "That down-stairs room's got a low winder, an' the three of us leaves for the Walkin' X before midnight. It'll be a purty alibi, as Jake kin vouch, becose we're ever' damn one of us in the White Man's House all night."

CHAPTER VIII

ON A PINON LIMB

THE white haze of the sand storm, obscuring the sun, had continued through the late afternoon while four hunched figures, three men and a girl, rode north from Toro toward the Walking X. At about the time of sundown there was a lull, so that the riders pulled down their mufflers and breathed in relief. They had walked their horses, Dick Carroll and Gains, the stranger, flanking the girl for most of the way. Conversation had been impossible. Now the ranch owner suddenly dropped behind, at a pretense of studying the landscape, and rejoined the other three on the Parson's left, leaving the two younger men next Joan Willoughby.

"Miss Willoughby's plannin' to visit for the winter, havin' finished school at El Paso," Carroll remarked, addressing the Parson. "She's a singer, and Miss Leffenwell's kind of countin' on her he'pin' in the move for a reg'lar church here."

Parson John smiled dubiously, having opposed a

" churchy " church that might drive away the range riders and cowmen whom he wanted most to reach. " Is this your first visit to Toro town? " he asked the girl.

" I was here once before—five years ago. Toro's changed a lot, it seems, in that time. "

"Yes, ma'am, it has. "

" For the better, too, " she said warmly. " Miss Leffenwell has written that you are chiefly responsible, Parson John. "

" Not at all, Miss. Times are changing for the better—everywhere. "

Carl Gains turned to the girl with low words that the others did not hear. Dick Carroll bent his mount slightly aside, beckoning to the Parson. " I don't want to talk trouble in front of Joan, " said the cattleman, " but I didn't make plain what I said about Hazen—why he wouldn't be a good dog, even if you did patch up our open differences today. " He stretched an arm to the east, then to the north, where the evening sky had grown leaden, revealing the drab horizon.

" You ain't visited us enough to know the lay here, exactly, Parson. The Walkin' X runs stock as far south as Toro, fenced to the stage road, and east to Cow crick, where it's fenced again at the Lazy H boundary. West she ain't fenced, account of Cat Mesa bein' high and plumb desert. North is open, at the Ladrones. " He made a sweep with his hand toward the dark, gloomy peaks.

"All right. My stock that has been leakin' has been goin' into the Ladrones, true enough. Them mountains are so big, east and west, as you know, Parson, that no man livin' ever traveled every canyon an' gorge that could be used by rustlers. There's a lot of Loma Grande mavericks bunched in them mountains, too, from the other side, Jaramillo to the Rio. But the point that interests me is that every time a raid is pulled, the fence between the Lazy H and the Walkin' X has been cut. Hazen's in league with the rustlers, Pars' John."

The other frowned, shook his head. "The Lazy H has lost a lot of stock, too, Dick."

"Shore. Part of the play. It don't stand to reason the thieves would come to Walkin' X direct from the Ladrones, straight north, and then cut due east acrost Cow crick an' my fence onto Lazy H, every time, does it?"

No, the Parson admitted it did not; there was something unexplained about that. But he did not believe Lonnie Hazen was a party to the rustling. He held his tongue about the actual sale of the Lazy H to Badger Brogan, as revealed by Hazen. Dick would find out that bad news soon enough, although he already knew that the Jaramillo leader was coming to make some deal with Hazen—perhaps to drive off some beef, by agreement. That fact alone had strengthened Carroll's suspicions and helped to put him in gun mood.

The renewed gale forced them to raise their face

shields, and conversation ceased. After another half hour's unpleasant ride they reached the Walking X ranch buildings, all adobe save the colonial style ranch house, rendered southern by the addition of its long, broad gallery. The four riders dismounted in front of the house, where the Mexican boy took their horses.

Darkness was settling over the range, the low cattle sheds with thatched roofs, the squat adobe bunk house, and the "mansion." The Ladrones stood black and lowering, now flanked in the west by a coppery sky. A calf bawled plaintively. Cheery greetings were sung out from the ranch house. In their midst rose a woman's high-pitched shriek.

A dark object, almost as broad as long, was catapulating across the ranch yard, upraised butcher knife glinting in the semi-darkness. The Parson saw it was a woman, and he glimpsed the two lumbering cowboys who sprinted away from her with loud laughs that held a serious note in them. The knife went hurtling in the shadows.

"That's Inocencia, the cook," grinned Dick Carroll. "It'd serve them two waddies right if she'd butcher 'em—and she'd do it, too. Minter and Zig's allus teasin' her." He called to the Mexican *moza,* soothed her injured feelings with promises to rawhide the two ranch bullies.

The party went on to the gallery, where Dick Carroll ushered Joan Willoughby into his maiden

aunt's arms. Introductions went apace, for Gains was a stranger. The Parson was greeted cordially, was surprised to find quite a gathering at the ranch house including a half dozen women, friends of the Carrolls from Toro and the ranches. The Parson noted that Carroll, in introducing Gains, gave no explanation of his presence. It was assumed by the company that he had come as escort for Joan, though the Parson knew this had not been his original mission here.

Minter and Zig Tinley and others of the hands had seen the girl's arrival. "A peach," was their verdict. In the bunk house they slicked their hair, donned their best, in anticipation of an informal, after-supper, homecoming dance.

"Who's Gains?" queried Duffy Butler, blue-eyed, honest fixture of the Walking X.

"Dunno. Nobody knows," enlightened Tramer.

"Wears a gun, an' looks like he mought have a derringer up his sleeve," declared Ramon Seres.

Miss Leffenwell was a charming hostess, making everyone feel at home, bearing good news that supper was waiting, in spite of Inocencia's interruption and foray from the kitchen. But at the first opportunity the gray-haired hostess drew the Parson aside for a quiet word:

"I told Dick to bring you. We had something special to discuss tonight, and aside from that you are always welcome. But here's a secret!" She whispered in his ear. "Hipkins brought word

about Lonnie and Dick. I wanted Dick to see you sure, to prevent a shooting. Knew you'd do it, if Dick saw you."

"They've settled that," smiled the Parson.

Miss Leffenwell squeezed his arm warmly, worshipful adoration in her bright eyes. "You're a wonder! I've put in several hours' torment fearing you might not see Dick in time."

The embarrassed parson grinned foolishly, disclaimed any big part in settling the feud. They turned again to the large parlor where, in the light of the chandelier lamps, the Parson studied the features of Gains, features that troubled him not a little, for all doubt vanished now that he had seen the young man before, without knowing when or where.

Gains, he observed, was under thirty, sharp-faced, cynical. There was something strong and vigorous about the fellow. He was not talkative, had a way of appraising everyone present. As the conversation later brought out, Gains was new to the Toro range, and the women promptly assumed there was an interesting explanation of his escort of Joan Willoughby from El Paso. Gains did not try to correct the impression.

During the meal that followed, frequent reference was made to the Parson, and his influence for law and order in the community, which in a few years had been transformed from bitter feudism and assassination to unbroken tranquillity, without a

single killing. No reference was made to the Hazen-Carroll matter.

When the party had again repaired to the large parlor before the log fire, Miss Leffenwell brought up the matter she had hinted at. "We have good news for you, Parson," she announced, her thin, gentle face beaming. "There is enough pledged to build a church!"

Parson John was taken aback, that things had proceeded so far; but he offered no protest. A committee was appointed at the meeting to organize a membership and to proceed with the building plans.

Had the Parson spoken his mind he might still have opposed the suggestion, on the same grounds he had mentioned to others against feminization of his work. Miss Leffenwell revealed that Joan Willoughby, her guest for the winter, was a skilled choir leader. The Parson heard that with a secret thrill.

Dancing followed in the large parlor and hall. Although the Walking X riders had been served their own meal separately and earlier by Inocencia, they came shyly forward when Ramon Seres and Duffy Butler were invited to thrum their banjos. Each vied to impress Joan, whose visit had been looked forward to for weeks; she was to be the ranch princess for a long time to come. The Parson —being a parson of Toro—participated. Joan favored him; in her presence he seemed clumsy without knowing why. But he enjoyed himself thoroughly.

Like most of the guests, the Parson put up at the

Carroll house for the night. Dick Carroll showed him his room. "I reckon, Parson, I'll have proof in the mornin' about what I said of Lonnie Hazen," the cowman said, as he turned to leave. The Parson noted that he had put on his hat and was wearing a heavy coat. He looked the unspoken question.

"Never seen it fail yet, on a specially stormy night like this, when we didn't miss some cattle," explained Carroll. "So me an' Soapy are goin' to take a pasear over to our fence-line, to see what we kin see."

The Parson was tempted to halt him, by revealing that Badger Brogan was taking over the Lazy H, but he held silence. It would be just as well for Carroll to sleuth about that night, when his suspicions would be found to be groundless.

In the morning at breakfast there was uneasiness because Dick Carroll and Johnson had failed to return. They had told Miss Leffenwell of their intention to be out part of the night, on business—nothing further. The Parson hid his own growing alarm.

After breakfast, the guests departed, except the Parson, who gave assurance that Carroll and his foreman had merely stayed out longer than planned. But he saddled Tumbleweed's borrowed horse and prepared to ride east toward the Cow creek line to see what he could see. Joan Willoughby walked out toward the corral.

"Nothing can be wrong, can it?" she asked, anxiously.

"I don't think so, Miss. He's just taken a long way around, I reckon."

"Don't you think the church idea will be nice?" she asked him.

"Very good," he answered, dubiously. "If we don't make it too churchy—for Toro."

"Oh," she laughed, "you're a funny parson. Do you know, I never saw a preacher dance before? You do it wonderfully. Where did you learn?"

"Oh, at different places. I hope you don't hold that against me."

"I don't. By the way, you and Mr. Gains did not seem to make up very well." Her warm-toned eyes held a twinkle.

"I'm sorry about that, if we didn't. I hold a grudge against no man. Maybe I should have extended myself to be more cordial to your—ah—friend."

"Yes, you should have; but I think he was rather stiff."

"Those ladies made some teasing remarks about you two," ventured the Parson, with supreme courage to probe their relationship.

"Yes," she said simply. "The dears must find romance somewhere!"

They had been together long enough to attract the attention of several at the house, among them Carl Gains, who finally sauntered over as the Parson swung to the saddle.

"How are the church plans progressing?" asked

the man, with a peculiar studied look at the Parson. The latter did not immediately reply. Joan Willoughby was equal to the occasion.

"Oh, we never mentioned it—or did we?" she asked innocently, looking at the Parson.

"I disremember." The range minister met the gaze of the tall, soldier-like figure, standing stiff and immobile. Some facial quirk that he saw about Gains gave the Parson an inward start. He thought of the voice that had come to him out on the sand wind in Toro.

The Parson lit his briar pipe, waved a hand, and cut over east, in the direction taken by Hip Hipkins and Ramon Seres a half hour before to look up the missing men. Hipkins had returned to the Walking X from Toro at daylight, had heard about Carroll's expedition, and started.

The range was calm after a night of screeching wind. Sunday morning's October sun had risen in a turquoise sky, dazzling and hot, garmenting the far ridges of the Ladrone mountains in flaming coats of scarlet and purple, painting the white waste of Cat Mesa just west of the ranch, with the glitter of blue diamonds.

As he rode, the Parson argued with himself that Carroll and Johnson were all right. His thoughts leaped to Gains and the uneasy feeling of menace the man gave him. To offset this, there was an inexplicable sense of elation over Joan Willoughby's act in coming out to talk to him before his departure.

He pictured frequent meetings with her in future, when she would sing at the new church that was destined to come in spite of his own wishes.

He wondered about Gains' arrival with her, wondered if it had been accidental. The torturing thought of Speck Ballentine, his old enemy, returned. He knew now she was Bob Willoughby's daughter, the same girl he had seen with Ballentine in the patio by the well six years before. That was a long time; she had been a mere child then. All thought of Ballentine had probably been forgotten by her long ago. But this girl undoubtedly had heard of Granger Hume, as an ogre, a monster, to her pure mind. And perhaps she had heard the truth—from Gains—the day before in Toro, when the words had swept to him down the wind.

No, that could not be—else she would not have sought him out and favored him as she had done. The Parson's reverie was broken abruptly.

Two riders swerved about the base of a tiny butte toward Cow creek. They pressed their mounts at sight of the Parson. A minute later they reined up short. One was Hipkins, the other the dusky-hued Seres.

"Dick Carroll an' Soapy Johnson has been hung!" flung out Hipkins, his wrinkled face twitching, his eyes wide. "At the old line camp at Pine Shadder Spring, an' both hangin' to a piñon limb. Looks like they was watching the line last night for rustlers, an' mebbe got tired early this mornin' an'

rolled in their blankets, when them cut-throats come onto 'em an' strung 'em up. Their bodies was both warm."

He jerked out a flask and gulped down a swift drink.

CHAPTER IX

A TRAGIC SUNDAY

HIPKINS had a lot more to say, on the ride in, to all of which Seres gave solemn nods of assent. The Parson listened silently, but with varying emotions. The actual arrival of Badger Brogan and his men in Toro late Saturday afternoon was unknown to the Parson until the Walking X buckaroo, with vivid words, pictured their sullen and meaningful entry. It was plain that Hipkins connected the crime of Pine Shadow Spring with the Jaramillo chieftain, although his sense of fairness compelled him to say:

"Every man of 'em stayed at the White Man's House last night, and in spite of what Lonnie told me about them buyin' out the Lazy H they didn't take possession yet. Jake Leach whispered to me that Badger give orders to his men to be good Injuns and not start trouble—even cut off their licker so's they wouldn't go on th' prod. And Badger seen

Judge Loftus and some more, sayin' he wanted to be neighborly and live in peace."

"And still you think they had a hand in this?" queried the Parson.

"Who else? Lonnie Hazen might 'a' been gunnin' for Dick Carroll yesterday, but Lonnie's white, an' when he holstered his gun, he meant it. Besides, Lonnie ain't the kind of coyote that'd sneak up on Dick in the dark and hang him."

That argument sounded irrefutable, admitted the Parson. Brogan's past reputation marked him as capable of such a crime, or worse, if the motive were present for it. "Badger ain't ever got over the time Dick ventilated his lung, neither," asserted Hipkins. Yet even Jake Leach agreed that the Jaramillo men stayed at his hostelry all night.

"One of you better cut off here and bring Doctor Chaves; he's deputy coroner," said the Parson, as they reached the Toro trail. Seres volunteered to go, and was off.

"Better tell Eli Becker, too," Hipkins called after him. "He's deppity sheriff." He made a wry face. "A h— of a deppity sheriff, that bald-headed sheep," he grunted, addressing the range minister.

Two other riders, Bill Minter and the lame Zig Tinley, had reached Pine Shadow Spring just as Hipkins and Seres had left with the tragic news. They had cut the bodies down, and were planning to bring them into the ranch house, without waiting for official red-tape.

The Parson decided to go on to the ranch with Hipkins; there was no need for him to go to the Spring. He knew the location of the line camp, near the creek, on the boundary of the Lazy H and Walking X. He judged that Hipkins was correct in his reconstruction of the crime—that the two murdered men had watched the range until early morning, then had gone to sleep. They could not have been taken without battle otherwise. Probably the hanging had been resorted to for the sake of silence; the slayers would suspect that other Walking X men might be posted near since Carroll and Johnson were there.

The painful task of imparting the news to Miss Leffenwell and Joan Willoughby was left to Parson John. The women bore up well—better, to outward appearances, than some of the Walking X hands, who twirled ropes in the horse corral, flung up saddles, and strapped on guns with choking oaths of vengeance, starting without plan or leadership to hunt down the murderers. Fearing a general range conflagration without reason or proof of anyone's guilt, the Parson halted them and snapped out orders:

"Stay away from the Spring, till we get a chance to read the signs—there's already been too many there for that, almost! And stay away from Toro and Badger Brogan's men till we get some proof. That's the wish of Miss Joan and Miss Leffenwell. There's one thing you can do—ride the range, es-

pecially toward the Ladrones, and see if there's any sign of a trailing bunch; if so, follow it. The sand storm cleaned the ground and tracking will be easy —if the rustlers did any work last night."

This was not wholly to the liking of Tramer, Duffy Butler and the rest, whose first impulse was to ride to the Spring. But Parson John spoke with an air of authority that they did not question.

"Drive over with the wagon, Hip, to be ready to bring the bodies in, after Doctor Chaves and Becker give the word." Hipkins, fortifying himself with ample heart-medicine, proceeded to carry out orders, never questioning the Parson's right to issue them.

Carl Gains was not in sight; the Parson learned he had ridden off about the same time the others had gone, taking a different course. After an hour Chaves and Becker arrived together in a livery rig, and set off for the Spring. They had gone only part way when Minter and Tinley, riding double, came around the tiny butte with the two bodies roped to their other horse. Heated words were exchanged, but it was too late now to fulfill the requirements of law.

"You haf made it imbossible to detect the griminals!" shouted Becker, waving his arms. Chaves was more moderate in his reprimand. They turned back with the bodies, meeting Hipkins with the wagon. The Parson was riding toward them, and from the other direction, Carl Gains came at an easy gallop.

Gains had arrived at the Spring as Minter and Tinley were leaving; he had not protested at the removal of the bodies, but had stayed to examine the ground, under difficulties. As he reached the inward-bound party he asked a question:

"You sure your horses didn't go to the other side of the spring, toward the creek?" He addressed Minter and Tinley.

"Dead shore!"

He asked the same question of Hipkins and Seres, first on the ground, and received the same answer.

"That's important," said Gains, laconically.

"How?" queried the Parson.

"There were a few imprints of cloven hoofs in the mud by the spring—cattle. And three horses beyond the spring, leading into Cow creek. Sand was smooth—storm-leveled. Tracks disappeared in the shallow water."

When, at nine o'clock that tragic Sunday morning, the bodies were brought back to the ranch, Gains sought out Joan Willoughby with news of his discovery. "Now we've got to go back, pronto, and follow those tracks. Don't know if we can pick them up; don't know how far those three walked in the water. But we'll see, and there may be a battle."

Gains, with Joan's willing approval, took what men remained at the ranch, Hipkins, Duffy Butler, Bill Minter, Seres and Zig Tinley, each armed with rifle and six-shooter.

Miss Leffenwell, on arrival of the bodies, had col-

lapsed. The arrangements devolved upon Joan Willoughby, for these two women were all of Dick Carroll's kin. The Parson, gunless, gave over thought of joining in the chase for the more urgent task of helping Joan to look after countless hard details. He sent the Mexican boy, Ricardo, to notify Figg, Toro furniture man and undertaker. The bodies were placed in the Carroll parlor. Becker and Chaves returned to town, saying they would go out later.

The Parson admired the manner in which Joan Willoughby faced these trying moments; her quiet dignity, womanliness, her brave command of herself at all times. She took hold of things in a way that left no doubt she had succeeded to leadership of the Walking X. The Parson marveled at her calm, but under it he read her grim purpose to run down the guilty men. She had O.K.'d the Parson's every word to the men; had seized upon Gains' plan for the chase with alacrity. It was as though she interpreted her greatest duty to her uncle to be the apprehension of those who had cut him down in the prime of life.

After Gains' departure she said to the Parson: "I shall want a strong man, the ablest here, to take charge with me in bringing the guilty men to speedy justice. A woman is limited in what she can do. Who is that man?"

"Why not Gains?" asked the Parson promptly.

"He has a cool head and executive ability—can handle men."

"Yes," she agreed, "but he is a stranger on this range, and I've got to have a man who knows the whole situation. If you were not a parson——"

"But I am. I'll do what I can for you in other things."

By middle morning the range began to funnel up here and there with sand spirals, and a little later the wind rose to a whining crescendo, as is characteristic of the equinoctial sand storms of the region. This would hamper tracking, if the men had got a warm trail. Some of the first riders returned, with reports that they had found no evidence of rustling during the night.

At noon, Gains, with the main bunch of man-hunters, returned. Their efforts to pick up the tracks from the stream had failed, and further work on that order was impossible, on account of the wind-shifting sands. They would go out again and ride for a random trail. But Doctor Chaves came with four men, picked two from the Walking X—Minter and Duffy Butler—and held his hearing. The principal witnesses were Hipkins and Seres; their testimony was corroborated by Minter and Tinley, who had cut down the bodies. The coroner's verdict was a perfunctory one—that Dick Carroll and Soapy Johnson had come to their deaths by hanging, by parties unknown.

"That's all we can do," asserted Chaves, a

dignified, graying man of Spanish ancestry, approaching the Parson, whom he greatly admired. "But personally I have my own ideas. Folks in Toro are keeping still tongues, but they are not blind to Badger Brogan's arrival yesterday evening."

"Where are Brogan's men now?" queried the Parson.

"Left this morning for the Lazy H, to take charge. It is known that his men spent the night at the White Man's House. But—" His dark eyes gleamed strangely. "Who can tell?"

Carl Gains had overheard a little of this. "Brogan's over at the Lazy H now?" he asked, eyes narrowing.

The doctor nodded. "But I'd advise you not to trespass on his range with a hostile question unless you're ready for a fight. Brogan's gang is the strongest bunch of gunmen that ever came onto Toro range."

"If Miss Joan says the word," asserted Gains, turning, "we'll organize a bunch and go over there pronto, to ask said questions."

"That would only make for bad blood," put in the Parson.

"Well, let Miss Joan decide."

"The Parson is right, until we have some clew," from the girl.

There was no church service in town Sunday morning; the flare-up of a prospective range war would ordinarily give the Parson occasion for a

straight-from-the-shoulder sermon and an appeal for peace; but this situation was too delicate at this stage. Besides, Parson John wanted to be at the Walking X while developments were possible any minute.

Miss Leffenwell, somewhat more composed, beseeched Joan Willoughby to take active charge of the ranch. "I know Dick would have it that way. If he has left a will, you are his chief beneficiary." Joan was not in the mood to think of such things, but she knew that Miss Leffenwell was helpless in this emergency.

Carl Gains, smarting under Joan's veto of his offer to question Brogan, rode through the afternoon with a bunch of armed men, toward the Ladrone foothills and Quemado Buttes. They returned before sundown, without a clew, and Gains immediately looked up Joan, in the office of the ranch house, where she was going through her uncle's papers to learn if there was a motive for the crime in that quarter.

"Miss Joan, I reckon there's something you ought to know," said the visitor, fixing her with searching gray eyes. "Something about a gent that's taking a mighty interest in you, seems like, since yesterday."

"Well?" she asked, quizzically.

"I think I've met your friend, the Parson, before —over in Loma Grande."

"Yes?" she asked quickly.

"Yeh. You recollect a certain gent that your friend, Speck Ballentine, used to talk about a lot—over at Loma Grande? A certain pistol expert and killer that 'most everyone used to wish was in jail or the cemetery?"

"You don't mean——?"

"Yeh, Granger Hume! Unless I'm mightily mistaken—and I don't often mistake a man—the Parson of Toro town is that same Granger Hume."

She gazed at him wide-eyed. "You are joking!" she faltered, incredulously. Suddenly her lids contracted. "And you would make charges like that *without being sure!*"

"Pretty sure," he returned, dryly. "You ever hear about Granger Hume's wrists—guns tattooed on 'em? Notice this parson always wears gloves or wrist guards or both? And when he don't—when he eats—you notice how careful he sits and holds his hands! Now, that's the only missing link in the proof we need—to see his wrists. I'll *know,* mighty soon.' That's all!" Gains hurried out into the ranch yard.

Half an hour later Joan Willoughby, on the gallery of the big house, watched the easy-riding figure of Parson John, jogging in from the direction of Pine Shadow Spring, whither he had ridden late in the afternoon. It was sundown; the wind was rising, and above her streamed a pointed V of wild geese, honking loudly, on their way south to the

marshes of the Rio Grande. She beckoned the range preacher, led the way into Dick Carroll's office.

"Parson—you've been very kind—my adviser during this trouble. Now I need a foreman—badly. I want you to take the job."

"Me? Foreman?" He smiled solemnly. "How ridiculous, in times like this! Of course, you flatter me. True enough, I know the cow business, but ——"

"I want a man at a trying time like this who will temper his decisions with moderation and wisdom—in order to avoid further unnecessary bloodshed," she said, adroitly.

The Parson remonstrated, but the girl insisted. "I understand you have been doing almost a full week's ranch work on the Fiddleback, besides your ministerial duties, and I shall ask no more, leaving you free as usual." Her tone was eager, pleading. In that moment the man thought her remarkable self-reliance had melted, and she had become a clinging, helpless girl in distress in the most trying situation ever faced by a woman.

"You will, won't you, please?" she implored, as though all her plans depended upon it.

"If you put it that way, I'll accept," said the Parson, grimly. "I doubt I could refuse you anything, Miss Joan."

CHAPTER X

BADGER BROGAN HEARD FROM

CARL GAINS, the Parson thought, did not take kindly to the news when he heard it Monday morning, and the Parson was right.

"Maybe you wouldn't have picked him for foreman, if you'd known Granger Hume's full history," said the visitor, to Joan Willoughby. "If you'd known some things I know."

"What, for instance?" she asked.

"Maybe he's a fugitive, on account of a killing or two chalked up against him. Who knows?"

"If you know, why don't you act?" she retorted, pointedly.

"I'm not a squealer."

"You squealed on his identity—alleged—to me!"

"Did I? Thanky. Sure, and that's all the credit I get for warning you when I saw him working his way into your good graces, and posing here among the women as a goody-goody preacher. Lord, I

never reckoned what I told you would put him in charge of the ranch." He laughed lightly.

"That's my affair, Mr. Gains."

"Sure. In a way, too, I admire your spunk. You hired him, Miss Joan, because you thought you were getting the best gunman on the Toro range, for this fight, now didn't you?"

She studied the man for a long moment, then asked: "You came to the Walking X on business with Uncle Dick. This crime has probably interfered with your plans, Mr. Gains. Would you mind taking up that business *with me?*"

"A little later, maybe," he said, evasively, and walked away.

The last of the riders who had gone toward the Ladrones had returned, empty handed, without a clew. If any cattle had been driven off, there was nothing to show it, and such check-up of the Walking X herd as was possible showed no evidence of a raid. It appeared that the hanging of Carroll and Johnson had been an isolated deed, having no bearing on a cattle raid. The Parson, as foreman, sent Minter, Seres and Duffy Butler to ride at random Monday with their eyes open. He listened to reports from Hipkins and Zig Tinley, who had spent Sunday evening in Toro, hearing what they could hear, which was little. Toro folk were not saying anything, no matter what their theories were.

Tumbleweed Jones arrived to take his new job;

with ranch work at a standstill, he spent much of the morning at Pine Shadow Spring.

The joint funeral was set for Monday afternoon, since early burials were the rules of the semi-desert range. Judge Loftus of the Bar Double L, Jes Mangel, Fiddleback owner, Doctor Chaves, Eli Becker, the Neff brothers and Don Alfredo arrived early for the services, some with their families. A score of cowpunchers, friends of Carroll or Johnson or both, attended. Even Lonnie Hazen was there. The Parson conducted the simple ceremony, in the course of which he addressed earnest remarks to the serious, glum-faced, silent men who overflowed the cosmos, juniper laden parlor and stood on the gallery.

" We can best show our appreciation and affection for Dick Carroll and Soapy Johnson by making deeds like this impossible in future, " intoned Parson John. " If Dick and Soapy were able to speak now, they would say: ' Let the price of our lives be security for honest, law-abiding men in the future. Let law and the courts be substituted for rope and gun promiscuously employed by lynchers and duellists. ' "

He pleaded for moderation now in time of white-hot passion and hatred against the perpetrators of this crime. " The guilty must be apprehended, tried and given the law's penalty, " he said. " But now is no time for guess-work or exacting of vengeance against men who may not, after all, be guilty. To

start a range war now would only be to perpetuate the evil that cost the lives of these two brave men. Murder and assassination will not bring them back; it will take more like them."

The Parson sensed that his arguments were falling lightly on many of the older employees of the Walking X, men whose grief found vent in the urge for vengeance. But Judge Loftus and Jes Mangel, chief powers on the range among honest cattlemen, gave sympathetic attention and frequent nods of assent. The Parson did not know how much these two feared the new Badger Brogan peril in their midst.

At the outer edge of the throng Bill Minter and his lame companion, Zig Tinley, got their heads together. "He's a h—l of a foreman, when there's a ruckus brewin'," muttered Minter.

"A squaw." Tinley made an ugly mouth.

"If this keeps up, I'm goin' to see Brogan, an' join a he-outfit," grunted Minter.

After the burial in the small plot on the Walking X ranch where Dick Carroll's mother and sister lay, under the protecting cliffs of Cat Mesa, Joan Willoughby gave way to the first visible signs of grief, riding back to the house with the Parson. "He never wronged a single human being. He made this country, stocked it, enriched it, created an empire out of a desert." Impulsively she flung her arm in a wide crescent from the heat vibrating mesa

horizon to the Ladrones' blue peaks and the gray-green range beyond Cow creek in the east.

"And now he dies because some black-hearted, thieving renegade, who never did a stroke of constructive, honest effort in his life so dictates. In spite of what you said, Parson, about moderation, and law—with one helpless deputy sheriff in this whole country to enforce it—I think men guilty of that crime are snakes and should be struck down as quickly as I'd quirt a diamond-back."

The Parson drew into a slower walk. "The men that killed Dick thought like you are thinking now, Miss Joan," he said, gently. "They did not believe in law to settle whatever grievances they thought they had. Can't you see there's no end of this killing and assassination, when once the feud spirit runs riot?"

She held silence, her eyes grown hard and dry, as her mount moved in a walk beside him. After a time she drew rein to a halt and faced him.

"'Then," she said, "we have only one choice. If the Walking X cannot mete out justice for this crime, we must send a hundred miles, across the Ladrones, to Loma Grande, and bring the sheriff of the county and a posse to run down these assassins." She studied him, searched his face.

The man's expression did not alter; his eyes met hers with their wonted expression of clear calm. But her words had reached deep within him. Loma Grande! Although it was the county

seat, Loma Grande was as effectively shut off from Toro by the great barrier of the Ladrone mountains as though it were across the line in Mexico. There flashed into the Parson's vision the Bull Mesa gunmen, the Golden Eagle saloon and gambling hall, its feudists of the old days, Speck Ballentine and Dad Walker. It was as though six years had rolled back, and Granger Hume was skulking behind the adobe walls with his ornate guns on the tragic night when he had slain his veteran idol of many hectic days of border warfare.

And the Parson knew that if Speck Ballentine found him out—as he would do if the Loma Grande posse came to Toro—he must meet Speck Ballentine with guns, must kill or be killed. That or remain forever branded a coward on the border. In either event his power for good in Toro would be gone, irretrievably.

Something of his thoughts, as he gazed on her, uncertain of reply, must have communicated to Joan Willoughby. "Well," she said, "shall we send to Loma Grande—for officers of the law? I understand that Sheriff Colcord has been bed-ridden for months and that a Mr. Ballentine—an able and fearless deputy—is now acting sheriff."

The man's face remained immoble. "Why do you ask me?" he returned, quietly. The voice that he had heard in the sand wind in town came to mind, and his frame tensed in dread that those words

might have been spoken to her. She gave no sign that would enlighten him.

Besides, she had mentioned Speck Ballentine in a strange way! She answered promptly:

"Because I've made you my adviser, the working boss of the Walking X, and I want to leave the matter of punishing the guilty in your hands." Her tone was earnest, sincere, bespeaking the utmost trust in this man—one who seemed too strong and virile, too tiger-framed and muscled, to be a preacher of soft words.

The Parson touched reins, moved ahead, at sight of Carl Gains approaching. He spoke quick words to the girl: "Don't send for the sheriff yet, until we see what we can learn, working with Becker, who is a commissioned deputy."

She inclined her head, eyes brooding on the flat range in front. Gains came upon them, and they continued to ride, saying little. Others joined them, and when they reached the ranch house Judge Loftus, Jes Mangel and most of the attendants at the funeral departed their several ways, after offers to help in any way they could serve the Walking X. But Joan Willoughby felt that most of these offers were meant for Miss Leffenwell and herself personally, rather than for the Carroll outfit in event of a war.

Later in the afternoon, when the Parson was coming from Dick Carroll's office after discussing some ranch details with Joan, he observed the crane-

like figure of Tumbleweed Jones in the doorway of the saddle room, adjoining the bunk house. Tumbleweed was crooking a finger, beckoning him. The Parson went over.

"Owing to the funeral and all, I haven't had a chance to congratulate you on the foremanship," began Tumbleweed, bending his long legs, seating himself for a lengthy discourse.

"Thanks, Tumble." The Parson hurried on. The puncher halted him.

"I've got something to show you." He led the way into the saddle room, where the rope had been carelessly hung after its gruesome exhibit at the coroner's hearing. "I've been looking at that rope," said the puncher, gingerly running his fingers along the strands. "Both men hanged on it. Take a look at this, Pars' John!"

He pointed to a thin tuft of dried grass hooked into one of the strands of the rope. "That," setting his glasses on the ridge of his sharp nose, "is a clew."

"How do you make that out?"

"That's Aristida arizonica. Arizona poverty grass. There ain't a blade of it grows on this range."

The Parson eyed the other keenly. "You sure of that?" he demanded.

"I'd ought to make you eat it, Parson, reflecting on my botany! There she is—I haven't disturbed it. You can take it to some professor, if you doubt

me. But I'd suggest that mum's the word, and you send me over to the Jaramillo country a couple weeks to check up. This rope is well-used, you notice, and the murderers have come from somewheres outside, recent enough to have that tell-tale poverty grass sticking to em."

"Tumble, keep it dark. Take your couple weeks off, and make the trip. I'll put this rope under lock and key." The Parson proceeded to coil the rope carefully and lay it in a trunk, which he locked. Tumbleweed made ready for the journey.

Turning from the saddle room, the Parson heard his name called. He looked across to the gallery of the ranch house, and saw Joan and Gains standing beside the railing. Hip Hipkins, in the saddle, was reined up before them, his horse a-lather. The Parson hastened over.

"Badger Brogan an' a bunch of hands rode into town again this afternoon," muttered Hipkins, the lines about his wrinkled jaw drawn taut. "Badger's at the White Man's saloon, orn'ry as a centipede. Talkin' noisy about what they'll do to Walkin' X if Walkin' X waddies continues to hint they're guilty of the hangin'. Badger found out yo're foreman now, an' he sent word with me that he wanted to see yuh, to put a stop to this said loose talk."

Joan Willoughby turned impatiently. "And I think we should send word to Brogan that he knows where to find Parson John! He can come here if he wants an interview!"

"Sure Mike!" put in Gains.

The Parson removed his big hat, mopped his light forehead above the tan. "If that's done, it'll show we defy him, and accuse him," he said mildly. "I'll ride in to see him—unless Miss Joan gives me positive orders not to."

The ranch mistress protested, but the foreman argued earnestly that a conference might bring out some incriminating facts, and Brogan would hardly come to the Walking X under any circumstances. She finally assented.

"You might stop and get the mail while in town," she said. "I've neglected sending anyone for it. Open any letters to Uncle Dick—there may be some business you will want to attend to."

A few minutes later, when the Parson had saddled and mounted, armed only with a pad of writing paper and a pencil, Gains, still standing beside Joan Willoughby, called to him:

"Where's your gun, Parson?"

"I don't reckon I'll need a gun."

The girl frowned slightly. "Perhaps you had better take some of our men with you—armed men."

"No," returned the Parson, touching a match to his pipe. "I'll go alone, and I don't want a gun." He bent his mount toward the south.

CHAPTER XI

THINGS IN TORO TOWN

IT was twenty minutes of five when the Parson rode into Toro—time for him to go to the post-office before attending to the matter with Badger Brogan. As he loped down the broad, dusty street, he was aware of the presence of several strangers in town, one of whom, with long black hair that fell over his shirt collar to his shoulders, caused the Parson to turn and look after him as he jogged slowly up the street in a heavily silvered saddle on a wiry little gray bronco. The rider might have passed for the Granger Hume of six years before.

A pair of loiterers, on foot, strolled up the board sidewalk and into the White Man's saloon. The Parson had no doubt they were bearing news of his arrival to their chief.

Proceeding to the low, box-like building that served as postoffice, the Parson dismounted, flat-knotted the bridle rein at the hitch rack, and strode

within. He was surprised to find Judge Loftus standing against the unpainted writing desk, plunged in thought. The judge looked up with quick nervousness as the range minister entered, and greeted him. While the Parson asked for the mail he noticed that Loftus strolled to one side, gazing at him, as though he wanted to say something.

There were two letters for Dick Carroll. The Parson held them unopened as he turned to Judge Loftus. "How are things, Judge?" he asked, genially.

The southerner, fingering his gray goatee, walked further aside, out of range of the entrance. "I understand the Neff boys are selling out," he said slowly, as he walked back.

"They've been wanting to sell for a long time—tired of the cattle business," said the Parson. "Who's taking over their Double N brand?"

"Badger Brogan."

"He'll be a real baron, if he keeps on," commented the Parson, lightly.

"Yes." The judge cleared his throat. "That's going to put me between Mist' Brogan's two ranches. I heah he's going to make me an offer, too."

The Parson's brows lifted. "I wonder where he gets the money," he said, again lightly.

"He doesn't offeh a lot of money, I understand. He bought the Neff boys on long time—and that is what makes me wondeh, about my own case. Mist'

Mangel's kind o' worried a mite, too, thinkin' he'll be squeezed."

"I wouldn't worry about it, Judge—until he makes an offer, at least."

"No." Loftus stroked his goatee. "By the way, Pars' John, I wish you wouldn't mention what I said. A felleh's got to be a little careful how he talks about—things."

"Sure, I understand. If anything comes up, Judge, that you don't like, be sure to see me, will you?"

"I'll be delighted, Pars' John. I wish you luck in your new job. I'd sure hate to see you have trouble, Parson." The judge walked without and climbed into the saddle, while the new Walking X foreman remained long enough to examine the two letters.

One was a statement from an El Paso bank, which the Parson promptly pocketed. The other held his interest. It was in Dick Carroll's own handwriting, addressed by him to one Joe Stack at Loma Grande, and returned to the writer with the notation on the outside of the envelope: "Addressee deceased."

The Parson hesitated about opening it, but he had Joan's instruction to do so. He turned the envelope to tear it, stared at it, then held it closer to his eyes.

"It's been opened already," he murmured. The clock on the wall struck five, and the Parson turned quickly to the side door leading into the postmaster's quarters.

"I've got a letter here that's been opened, George," he said to the one-armed man at the desk. "You know if it was opened here?"

The official looked at it. "No," he said. "Miss Riggs called my attention to it when it came. Must have been opened at Loma Grande."

"Thanks." Walking out into the lobby, the Parson loosened the carelessly repasted flap and read:

> "Dear Joe: Johnson and I will be with you on the tenth. If Badger Brogan or any of his known followers come into Loma Grande again, grab them. The two strays with your brand that we picked up on this side of the Ladrones tell the story. No cattle would take that altitude without being driven. We have certain proof that Brogan is in the Ladrones and will give that to the grand jury with the facts about the strays, to say nothing of Lonnie Hazen's connection, which we can't yet prove. At the same time Johnson knows something of Brogan's killer record that the grand jury will be interested in. Keep this quiet until we arrive there.
>
> "Yours as always,
>
> "Dick."

The Parson's eyes widened with every sentence, until he stared at the white paper. He began at the beginning again and read it over more slowly.

"That's mighty important, as evidence," he mur-

mured, carefully refolding the letter and replacing it in the tell-tale envelope. Now he perceived the motive for the hanging of Carroll and his foreman. These two were in possession of some facts that the Jaramillo chief did not want the world to know. Some friend of Brogan's in the Loma Grande post-office had scanned the contents, tipped off the rustler. If Dick Carroll was right, Badger Brogan had been collecting cattle from ranches on the north side of the Ladrones as well as the south.

"It's likely that Badger, on the strength of this letter, decided to make a quick change of base, using his ill-gotten gains to go into the cattle business under the mask of a legitimate owner of the Lazy H," reflected the Parson. "Unless I miss my guess, he'll continue on the rustle here, with the Lazy H as his operating post." His jaw set, as he thought of the girl owner of the Walking X, and his own responsibility in protecting her herds.

That the letter should have been returned, after being opened, puzzled him for a time, until he concluded that it would not have been returned if the postoffice spy had known the fate in store for Carroll and Johnson. A voice interrupted his thoughts; he looked up quickly at the bandy-legged figure who had approached unobserved at the doorway.

"Mister Brogan's waitin' for you over to the White Man's House, Parson," said the puncher.

"You one of his men?" asked the other, squinting at the red-veined features of the fellow and

marking him well for future reference. The stranger was conspicuous for his hand-scrolled calf-leather boots from which protruded big silver rowels.

"Ye-ah, I'm his new Lazy H foreman—Jerry Gore. Glad to meetcha, Parson!" The man grinned "What'll I tell Badger?"

"Tell him I'm busy."

"Busy, eh? You look 's busy 's a squaw skinnin' bufferlo."

"I'll see him later." The Parson turned as the postmaster came out of his office. He drew the one-armed official aside.

"I'd like you not to mention that letter, George, for the present," he said. The postmaster nodded. "Hope there won't be any trouble over it, Parson."

"I hope not." The range minister walked with him to the street, where they separated. Having some papers to get at his "parsonage" room at the Painted Pony, the Parson crossed over to the pool hall.

"I was hopin' you'd come in," greeted Don Alfredo, from behind the cigar case. "Want to see you a minute."

The Parson walked back to the bench with him.

"Brogan and two of his gunmen were in to see me awhile ago," said the Spaniard. "They served notice they'd shoot me up and burn me out if I allowed you to preach any more sermons in my hall."

The Parson grinned, waited for Don Alfredo to go on.

"They accused you and the Walking X of talking lies about the murder; said there was to be no more church while this parson-person was favoring Walking X."

"That settles it, I reckon, for the present at least." The Parson rose. "I wouldn't ask you to run the risk——"

"I'm willing to defy them, Pars' John."

"No, tell 'em church is suspended, so far as this hall is concerned. That'll at least save your property —and maybe some lives." The parson's eyes glinted; suddenly he chuckled. "I've got a date with Brogan now. See you later, Alfredo." He went out, continued down the street toward the newly painted white building that was Jake Leach's saloon and hotel. Jerry Gore had gone on and was standing at the swinging doors.

"Mister Brogan's in the side room," volunteered the lieutenant. "Foller me, Parson."

They passed beyond the bar, at which the Walking X foreman observed three strange range men; there were others at two of the card tables at one side, among them the long-haired individual whom the Parson had seen riding in the street. Brogan's men fell suddenly silent at the Parson's entry. In another moment Jerry Gore shoved open a side booth door under an alcove off the saloon. "Right in here, Parson," he said loudly.

A tall Mexican, hair sleeked down over his forehead as though greased, rose from a chair opposite his chieftain. Although six years had fled, the Parson recognized the oaken face, the cruel lips and jaw, as those of the man on the desert who had taken his guns from him near Rotten Granite Tanks. Luis Escobar rose, jerked at his gold-braided jacket, turned quickly from the room. Jerry Gore followed him.

The Parson turned his eyes on Badger Brogan, sitting at the small table, cigarette hanging from his lower lip. It was the first time the range minister had ever seen the king of the Jaramillo country. At a glance the Parson noted the hard, hate-lined features, blotched, tight skin drawn severely over the front skull bones.

"Set down, preacher-man," grunted Brogan, without rising, gesturing to the chair vacated by Escobar. "I won't waste no words. Reckon you know I'm the new owner of the Lazy H?" The gunman studied the Parson's middle, devoid of cartridge belt or pistol.

"Uh huh. Yes. Sure!" The Parson looked quizzically at the Jaramillo chief, gloved hands thrust in his pockets. "Lazy H owner, and church censor, too, eh?"

Badger Brogan grinned. "Mebbe so! But let's git this straight. You, bein' a preacher, are runnin' the Walkin' X for a new filly from El Paso—that right?"

The other gazed on the gunman with steady eyes that flickered strangely down deep within the irises.

"Answer me," commanded Brogan thickly, leaning forward on the bare table, fixing the Parson with half-shut jet eyes.

The Walking X man stared reproachfully. "My gracious! If you want me to answer questions, you'll have to ask 'em in a civil manner!"

The short, broad figure stiffened; his leathery fingers squeezed out the embers of his spent cigarette. "The Walkin' X is talkin' like a flock of nut-jays that Badger Brogan's men had a hand in the hangin' of them two hombres," mumbled the Jaramillo chief. "I calculated I'd better call in the sky-pilot boss, an' put the fear o' God into him, now, before it goes any further!"

CHAPTER XII

BADGER LAYS DOWN THE LAW

PARSON JOHN smiled at Badger Brogan's words and mien, and the corners of his eyes wrinkled in amused contemplation of the frank cutthroat before him, a man whose obvious ill nature had been leading him into extremes of very rash conduct from the moment of his arrival on the Toro range.

Vague whisperings of the deeds of the Jaramillo terror had reached the Parson, back in Loma Grande; he knew there was ample ground for Badger's hideous reputation; had heard it said that Brogan was the one man besides Granger Hume whom Speck Ballentine genuinely feared. But his attitude now stimulated too much the theatrical to appear to the Parson as menacing. The Walking X foreman let his gaze rest on the intent orbs of the gunman, and his lips broke into a grin.

"Goin' to try to scare us'n all, eh?" demanded the visitor, casting aside the lingo of his calling.

"Goin' to make the Walkin' X eat every word

spoke agin me an' my hands in connection with the killin'!" Badger Brogan sat hunched, leaning slightly forward.

"When yuh goin' to leap?" The Parson imitated the crouch of the Lazy H owner. "Glad yuh rattled before yuh struck. Now, if you start rompin' on me, Mister Brogan," he continued, in an easy drawl, "I'm liable to get plumb disgusted. Might even call a halt to any further negotiations!" He showed his teeth genially to the Jaramillo man.

Brogan's threatening pose underwent a slight transformation; his frame relaxed, and he squinted with a puzzled expression on this preacher who spoke and looked like an assured, self-possessed gunman himself. Quickly he rolled a fresh cigarette. He tapped the table with his knuckles.

"Me an' my men was in this hotel last Saturday night, an' never left here until Sunday mornin' after eight o'clock, as Jake Leach will vouch fer—an' any skunk that says we had a hand in that hangin' is a lyin' coyote," snarled the rustler. "An' I'm holdin' Walkin' X accountable for them said lies. An' that ain't all, neither!"

The Parson sat up with an exaggerated jerk. "Gosh! Something more? Now, as a matter of fact, the Walkin' X hasn't charged you with the crime, Badger, but if you insist——"

"No, that ain't all!" cut in Brogan with a low growl. "Lonnie Hazen's papers turned over to me when I bought him out showed an even six hundred

head of cattle missin', an' Dick Carroll knowed where them head went. One of the first things you and yore girl boss does is turn over to the Lazy H six hundred fat steers to make up for what Walkin' X brand-altered durin' the last year."

The Parson's eyes grew hard at this sally of the Jaramillo leader. He made prompt rejoinder:

"That's a lie, Brogan!"

The cigarette fell from the gunman's lips. "You s-s-sheepherder!" He rose swiftly, eyes glinting, lips twisted down at the corners. "You will call me a—a liar!" He jabbed at his six-shooter, which leaped with incredible swiftness and rested with the black bore gaping at the Parson. "I've a mind to drill yuh——"

"Shoot away," drawled the other, hands in pockets, maintaining his sitting posture. "You know you're lying when you say any Lazy H stock has been brand-altered by Dick Carroll. It couldn't be done in the first place, changing Lazy H to Walking X, and you know it, Brogan!"

"You know a lot 'bout brand-alterin', fer a parson," sneered Brogan, marveling at the other's calm nerve. "You don't seem to sabe that when Badger Brogan pulls a gun he don't usually stop there! If you stick out that job on the Walkin' X fer long, yo'll find out what kind of a hombre Badger Brogan is!" He slowly snuggled his big wooden-handled gun into its sheath.

"Maybe I'm a fair reader of character, at that,"

returned the parson promptly. "Kind of natural for you to flash your gun on a man who isn't armed, eh, Brogan? When a man does that *and opens other people's mail,* he wouldn't stop at hanging a man, now, would he?"

The Jaramillo chief's hands gripped the edge of the table, and his eyes dilated with astonishment and rage. "What yuh mean, hombre," he whispered hoarsely, "by openin' other people's mail?"

"Nothing much. If this is all the business you called me to Toro for, I'll be moseying back to the rancho." The Parson rose.

"No, not yet, you don't!" shot out the gunman, lids contracting with sinister abruptness. "Not till yuh make yore talk plain! Set down!" With a deft move Badger Brogan had his gun at hip.

"This is a sort of enforced interview, eh, Brogan?" jeered the Parson. "Well, go on, and say your speech." With that he sat and crossed his legs carelessly.

"What yuh mean by openin' mail?" snarled the rustler.

"Didn't you?"

"No, damn you!"

"Well, perhaps I was wrong—might have been one of your good friends!"

"Yo're a liar!"

"Yes? Lay down your gun."

Badger Brogan, his stocky frame rigid behind the table, rose slowly, and stood with searching eyes

on the enigmatic features of the Parson of Toro, a man without a gun, who seemed to have knowledge more damaging than even Dick Carroll had possessed. Yet the gunman grasped at a straw—this preacher *might* not mean the same thing that Brogan had in mind. If he slew this puzzling parson now, it would interfere with well-laid plans for the future, concerning a general range clean-up. Besides, it would be hard to claim self-defense, even in the White Man's House; it was likely that this man of the gospel never carried a gun; could not even handle a weapon. It would be better to get the Parson at another time.

Brogan did not lay down his weapon. He affected an injured air. "The Walkin' X is talkin' a lot, without anything to back what they say," he grunted. "The Lazy H, under new ownership, ain't goin' to be rode over by Walkin' X, an' that's final. Yo're goin' to deliver them steers——"

"Like fun we are!"

Brogan's tight-skinned face drew into a hard, glistening mask, accentuating its mottled, spotted ugliness. "An' you a preacher, spoilin' to bring war on the range, instead of settling with Lazy H fair an' square." He jerked out the makings, proceeded to roll a cigarette. "All right. *Bueno!* I'll talk to your she-boss!" His face lighted into a grin.

"I don't think she'll talk to you, Brogan."

"Huh? Why not? She ain't so damn much, an'

I reckon she ain't any better'n a lot of women that Badger Brogan——"

"Don't talk about her!" shot out the Parson, warningly, rising suddenly. "I reckon you've said all you wanted to say to me, and I'll be going." He turned toward the door. The knob turned and Jerry Gore's bow-legged figure blocked the entrance. Gore pronounced a single word to his chief:

"Gains!"

With that he was gone. Brogan faced the Parson. "I got one more word to say, before yuh leave, hombre." He shoved back the door and peered into the open saloon, where the Parson's gaze, through the aperture, revealed Carl Gains standing at one side of the barroom. Closing the door silently, the gunman gestured to the Parson to sit again.

"I'll stand. Say it, pronto, Brogan."

"On'y this, preacher-man! If yo're rarin' to have a war with the Lazy H, I'm layin' my cyards on the table. That hombre that jist looked in here was Jerry Gore, a pistol-fighter. That Mex—the one you see when you first come in here—was Luis Escobar. If yuh don't know it, bananas an' whiskey'll kill any man, and so'll Luis Escobar, if yuh try to feed on him! Myself—I'm a gun-fanner, an' I ain't remarkin' what I kin do! Now, if you think the Walkin' X kin stand aginst the Lazy H, bring on yore revolver experts, pronto!"

"That all?" drawled the Parson.

"Jist one more word, preacher-man! Ever hear tell of a hombre by the name of Granger Hume—over Loma Grande way? I reckon not, you bein' a gospel man!"

The Parson's eyes contracted. "What—about—him?" he asked slowly.

"He's a killer, that's all, Parson. And he walks right into the sheriff's office, he does, over to Loma Grande, an' the sheriff is scared as a nester, sabe? Well, Granger's here in Toro town this very minute. How's that?"

The Parson stiffened slightly, and he met the rustler's eye with a trace of dread, although he knew that Brogan lied when he told the story about him walking into the sheriff's office.

Badger Brogan reached the door, swung it out several inches. "Lookee out there, at that hombre standin' acrost from yore Tehanner friend, Gains!"

The Parson saw the long-haired individual whom he had noted on the street; saw to his amazement that the fellow wore a buckskin cape and star-studded boots, the makeup that he had once prided himself on, along the Rio Grande.

"That's Granger Hume," whispered the Jaramillo man, "and he's pitched in his hardware with the Lazy H!"

"H-m-m!" The Parson's expression cleared and a smile curved his lips. "Quite a collection of pistol-fighters you've got to look after you, Badger Brogan!" He continued to gaze on the man in the

barroom with the get-up of the notorious Granger Hume, slightly younger than himself, with slender hands, small feet like his own. The Parson could not see his wrists.

"Yeah, an' we mean business, about six hundred head. You tell that—heifer that's runnin' the Walkin' X——"

He got no further. A sharp, terrible fist, wrist and arm movement brought bone and muscle against the thin-lipped mouth that held the insult, and sent the rustler hurtling across the unpainted table. Badger Brogan let out a wolf yelp, his bat-wing chaps flapping in air. As he landed he went for his gun.

CHAPTER XIII

A SCRAPPIN' MINISTER

BADGER BROGAN'S yelp, and the thud of his body, had been heard in the saloon. Jerry Gore was first through the door, and he came with gun up. Unwittingly he saved the Parson's life, darting behind him, in line, at the moment that Brogan was ready, in his insane rage, to thumb the hammer. Almost instantly the door passage blocked with Lazy H men and the room filled with them. In the company were Luis Escobar and the long-haired puncher who called himself Granger Hume. Brogan was swearing roundly.

"He ain't got a gun!" grunted Jerry Gore, collaring the Parson, holstering his own weapon smoothly, glaring with wild wonder at his chief, who was rising from his knees, spitting red, gun barrel trailing downward.

"Whadda he do, Badger?" queried Gore, releasing his hold on the Walking X foreman as that individual turned half around and gave him a fighting look.

"Nothin'," lied Brogan, between clenched teeth, a couple of which his tongue told him were loose. "I was settin' on the edge of this danged table, and it tipped."

"It shore made one hell of a racket," asserted the long-haired puncher, grinning and exchanging looks with the rest of the Lazy H crew. "Next time yuh do that, Badger, don't scare the house. We thought they was murder some'eres, plumb center."

A smile came to the Parson's lips, at Brogan's ill attempt to hold his dignity in the presence of his followers. The king of the Jaramillo made an involuntary swipe at his mouth with his hand, checked it, and glared at the long-haired one. "I'll lick the man that grins, with guns, not exceptin' Granger Hume," growled Brogan. "That table laig knocked the wind out'n me, and that's why I grunted. What's that there gent hornin' in on this fer?," He motioned toward Carl Gains, whose tall figure framed the doorway, his gray eyes on the group.

"He's a Walkin' X man, and come down personal to see yuh, Badger," informed Jerry Gore. "He was waitin' till you got through with th' Parson."

"He was, eh?" Brogan hitched at his belt. "All right, preacher-man, me an' you has an understandin'. *Hasta luego!*"

The Parson nodded, and strode out across the barroom, as Badger Brogan beckoned to Gains, dismissed his men, and closed the door. As the range

minister reached the double swinging doors to the street, a hand tapped his shoulder. He turned to face the puncher with the buckskin cape and the long hair; a keen look revealed that his eyes were not matched—one was gray, the other brown!

The imposter smiled crookedly. "A rompin', fightin' bobcat parson, shore 'nuf!" he hummed. "You knocked Badger plumb over that there table! I'd like to see yuh try that on *me,* preacher-man!"

"Why, I thought, Badger explained it was a table-tippin' seance, or something," grinned the Parson. "You're Granger Hume, ain't yuh?" The question was asked innocently while the speaker gazed fascinated at a pair of projecting ivory-handled pistols that might have been made to order in imitation of his own.

"The same."

"I reckoned the real Granger Hume was dead—leastwise the sheriff and Speck Ballentine have given him up, after a six-years' hunt," commented the Parson, watching the puncher's sharp features.

"And that's where they don't sabe the tricks of Granger Hume!" The gunman's fingers brushed the fringes of his cape; his wrists revealed no tattoo marks.

"You're some little trickster, then?"

"I betcha I am! Jes' somehow cain't seem to keep the old guns outa things when they's framin' up to be a ruckus."

"Things framin' up for a ruckus, around Toro town, are they?"

"Uh huh!"

"What did you do with the gun pictures on your wrists, Granger?"

"Had 'em bleached out—made a trip plumb to Cheegawgo!"

The Parson whistled softly; he saw the other's unmatched eyes narrow slightly. "Going to be trouble on the range, you say?"

"Didn't the big chief lay down th' law to yuh, preacher-man—how the Walkin' X has got to square up them six hundred missin' head from the Lazy H? Badger ain't no fool, Mister Parson, and when he rides into a country, folks dances, like they do over Jaramillo way! No, he ain't no fool, even if he did go over that table, Parson, when you slugged him when he wasn't lookin'!"

The insult was deliberate, uttered for a purpose, of which fact the Walking X foreman was fully aware, for he had not been blind to the movement of Brogan's followers toward them while the man of the unmatched eyes talked. The Parson had seen the gestures of Jerry Gore, and the no less significant approach of Luis Escobar, at the long-haired one's right.

"Being a parson, and not wanting to pick a quarrel, I dislike to call men liars, even if they are liars," drawled the minister-foreman, calmly, eyeing the other cannily. "So, to avoid any further fisti-

cuffs, I'll be on my way." He shoved open the swinging doors.

The puncher laid his hand on the Parson's shoulder, and, with a quick jerk, turned him on his heel and shoved him back into the room.

"Not yet. Even gospel-speelers cain't hide behind women's skirts any more in Toro town. Since yo're passin' out liars so polite-like, I'd crave to see yuh borrow one of these gent's pistols and do yore talkin' thataway!"

"H-m-m!" The Parson's lids contracted slightly. "The preacher-man would make good meat for a Billy-the Kid gunman and killer like you, wouldn't he? Now I tell you, Granger, I'd be tempted to take yuh on—yessir—if it wasn't kinda unseemly for a minister—and if I didn't have a sneakin' notion that this Granger Hume is a fake!"

"A—f-fake!" yowled the puncher. Swiftly his hand clapped to his holster. "I'd drill yuh shore, if it wasn't yo're a woman in man's clothes!" He stooped quickly, spun the six-shooter across the floor, shunted the other one after it. "Hold my irons, Jerry!" he shot out. "It wouldn't be fitten to use a gun on this she-boss of the Walkin' X. Now roll up yore sleeves, Mister minister, for I'm goin' to romp on yuh an' teach yuh a set of manners!" he yelled.

Deliberately and with a great show of ceremony, the long-haired gunman twirled his hat aside and

swung off his cartridge belt. "You're a scrappin' minister, an' now is the time to scrap!"

The Parson had already taken appraisal of the man of the unmatched eyes, no mean antagonist so far as physique and size were concerned. He did not stop to debate now whether a barroom brawl were in keeping with his adopted rôle as an apostle of law and order and peace in Toro. He waited until his adversary leaped toward him, fists swinging.

One of those fists, in spite of the Parson's marvelous dexterity, landed with stinging force on his ribs, driving him to one side. With a yell, the long-haired man came on again, and this time he crashed against the piston stroke of the preacher's right arm and fist. He went down like a sack of sand, and at that moment the Parson saw Badger Brogan and Carl Gains emerge from the side room.

"What the—?" bellowed Brogan, lunging forward. "Come on, waddies! Kill that preachin' hombre—but don't use yore guns! He ain't armed, and the hull town knows it!" The Jaramillo chief, still stinging at the memory of the Parson's blow, and the damaging evidence he possessed, swung his arms, squared, halted an instant until he saw Jerry Gore, Luis Escobar and others moving on the Walking X foreman, then pitched in.

Four pairs of fists seemed to strike the Parson's head and body at once. In the daze that followed, he realized vaguely that he had driven home one

telling punch on the mulberry countenance of Badger Brogan; dimly he saw the rustler chief falling away from him. He felt himself hurtling backwards, through the swinging doors to the street. In the rush of the Jaramillo gang upon him, he had a dizzy picture of a dozen Jerry Gores raising gun butts to strike him, felt a dozen glancing blows on his skull, heard someone cry out: "Kill him! Kill him!" The multiple gun butts raised again.

The White Man's saloon and the street whirled into space around him.

What seemed a day and a night to the Parson was in reality a space of three minutes; blood crackled in his ears, and his head was bursting when his eyes opened on dimly defined figures about him, as he lay with his back to the boards of the sidewalk. Then the figures cleared sharply. He pressed downward with his elbows, to rise, and the words of Carl Gains drifted to his ears:

"Help him up, Hip! You hombres stand back, or I'll drill yuh sure!"

The Parson's eyes rolled toward the speaker. Carl Gains and Hipkins were standing together against the wall, guns leveled, facing the sullen Jaramillo men. The slim, alert figure of the veteran bronco-peeler moved toward him. He felt an arm lifting him, and he stood weakly on his feet.

Badger Brogan, his thick lips bearing a trickle of crimson, was standing with arms elevated. Jerry Gore was behind him, in like attitude, and three

other Lazy H punchers with Luis Escobar were lined up on the sidewalk, eyes fixed on the tall man with the drawn gun while they reached stiffly upward.

Brogan uttered an oath. "You'd never stopped us, hombre, if yuh didn't draw when we was usin' our fists, an' couldn't draw! Any one of us'll take yuh on with sixes, Tehanner!"

"Using your fists!" hissed Gains. "Tryin' to kill him with your gun handles—that's what you was tryin' to do. All right! I reckon there's enough decent citizens of Toro saw it, and you can put down your paws now and start shootin' if you dare." He holstered his big Colt gun swiftly and faced them.

The Parson felt his swollen head, where Gore's gun butt had struck him. Strength was coming to him fast. "I reckon I'm all right," he drawled, "and I'm mightily obliged to you, Mister Gains!"

"Better walk with me, now, Parson," put in Hipkins. "Think yuh kin ride yore bronc?"

"You bet." Flanked by Gains and the older man, the foreman of the Walking X moved slowly toward the hitch rack in front of the plaza, conscious that Badger Brogan's crowd were glaring anathema after them in the mellow light of an amber sunset.

"They're sure going to try to kill you, Parson, for some reason," said Gains, as they reached their horses. "I read it in Brogan's face. It's up to you to wear a gun."

Hipkins, shielded by his saddle, took a slight swig of heart-tonic.

A troubled frown creased the Parson's forehead; he did not reply to the remark of the stranger on Toro range.

CHAPTER XIV

THE PARSON MAKES A DECISION

IT was dark when the three riders reached the Walking X. Few words had been spoken except those of Hipkins, who chattered on about "the ruckus," other "ruckuses" in which he had taken part in the sinful old days of Toro town. Hipkins declared he had feared trouble on the Parson's departure to interview Badger Brogan, and had loped along behind his foreman to "horn in" if needed.

"If it wasn't for Mister Gains ketchin' up to me and tellin' me to lay off, I'd been right in that saloon from the start, instead uh the finish," affirmed the veteran puncher. "An' I'd most likely performed some fancy gun-work, as yore body-guard—you kin mark that down! As things turned out, it was Mister Gains got the drop on them butcher-birds."

Parson John found no need for a bandage, for Jerry Gore's pistol butt, while striking hard enough to stun him, had not opened the flesh. He realized

the truth of Gains' declaration that Brogan had intended having him pummeled to death. That kind of a murder would have given the Jaramillo crowd an "out," whereas a shooting would not have done so, since the Parson did not carry a gun.

As for Gains, the Parson puzzled a lot about his part in the whole affair. Suspicion that arose when Gains asked for the interview with Brogan had vanished with the exhibition of the stranger's nerve in balking the gunmen. More than once on the ride to the ranch the Parson reflected that he owed a debt to Gains that he could never repay. He hoped the stranger would reveal the rôle he was playing about the Walking X, but Gains was as silent as Hipkins was talkative.

"Miss Joan trusts him, and I'll do the same, from now on," the Parson resolved, as they turned their mounts past the corrals to the lantern-lighted gallery of the ranch house. "Some day I aim to repay him."

The two lanterns on the gallery post indicated that the new mistress of the Walking X was awaiting their arrival. Although it was the day of the funeral, only Mrs. Loftus had stayed on with the two women, and the big house was deserted without a male occupant in the absence of the Parson and Gains. As the riders swung down before the steps, Joan Willoughby was at the railing.

"What did Badger Brogan say?" were her first words.

" It haint what he said, so much as what he done, Miz Joan!" shot out Hipkins, wagging his unkempt head. " Th' danged skunks nigh killed the Parson yere, and his gang would 'a' done it, if Mister Gains hadn't up with his pistol an' druve them into their corners!"

She turned inquiring eyes on the two younger men, who strode up the steps toward her, the Parson showing no trace of his weakness of an hour before.

" It's jist their caliber, to pick on a unarmed preacher," Hipkins rambled on, " But holy, jumpin' cats, Miz Joan, you arta see that there cowboy minister scrap! Uh huh! Talk about a man uh peace! I'd give a month's wages if I'd seen all that show, but I only seen the tail-end, and while I was lookin', that there parson was wildcattin' them waddies with his both fists, yes, ma'am! And from what I could gether, he knocked out Badger twict, and put that long-hair gent down for the count, not figurin' on what he done to them other ugly faces. You picked a scrappin' foreman, ma'am, shore enough, even if he is a minister uh the gospel, yes, ma'am!" He hustled off toward the bunk house to jubilate as the others neared the door.

Gains maintained silence, offering no word in praise or condemnation of the Parson's rôle. In the presence of Joan Willoughby it seemed that his manner was again tinged with hostility toward the

foreman, an attitude that the Parson could not understand in view of his conduct at the saloon.

"Oh," said the girl, "this is all a hodge-podge; come in, and we'll hear the whole story!"

They went into the office room, in the cool, airy corner of the house overlooking the Ladrones; the night was mild, the four large windows, partly open, admitting the odor of Miss Leffenwell's yard flowers and Inocencia's late-brewed coffee.

"It's a simple story," said the Parson, rather crestfallen. "I lost control of my brains while talking to Brogan, then again in the saloon when a puncher picked a quarrel with me. In the melee, Mr. Gains probably prevented a murder when they got me down and started to use their guns on my head. I'm plumb disgusted, Miss Joan, and if you don't mind, I'll go back and wash up, and Mr. Gains can tell the whole thing."

The Parson proceeded to his sleeping room on the other side of the house, scrubbed himself, then propped his feet on a chair and sat on the bed smoking his pipe. His humiliation drove home to him—he a man who through years had won the respect of the community, engaging in a saloon brawl. True, he had lost his head first through an insult aimed at Joan. But he could not tell her that.

There was more dignity in what Gains had done, in using his gun, he realized. Yet he did not intend to resort to guns. The thought brought a shudder, with memory of Dad Walker. Besides, his gun

fever would preclude the use of arms, and he had taken an oath never to kill another man. For six years he had been in hiding so he would not have to meet Speck Ballentine; he did not intend to strap on guns even in this crisis at the Walking X.

Carl Gains' hauteur and reserve did not drop from him on the departure of the Parson; his rather handsome features held a slightly vainglorious aloofness designed to impress the mistress of the ranch.

"Well, Mr. Gains?"

"I'm afraid our good friend the Parson has tangled things up a bit, Miss Joan. He meant well enough, of course. But he's put Brogan on the prod, just at a time when we might have wheedled some important admissions from him." He walked to and fro before the open windows, hands behind his straight back.

"Your gun saved him, as Hipkins says?" She sat on the edge of the table, her riding skirt falling apart at the tops of her glistening boots.

"Well, yes—not much credit to me, though. I dislike to boast, but I've always been able to handle myself with a six-shooter."

"I'll give you credit, Mr. Gains, for both skill and courage, halting that gang!"

The man nodded deprecatingly, gestured with fine unconcern.

"Getting back to the Parson—the reformed Granger Hume, as I believe, Miss Joan—his good

intentions have somewhat disrupted my plans to tackle Brogan in a sane, searching investigation. I had a talk with the rustler. Went in and faced him with the statement that Walking X disavows irresponsible talk in Toro; that he might clear himself in the public mind if he made a frank statement. My object, of course, was to snare him into some fatal admission that might give us a clew—— "

" And what did the fellow say? "

" His alibi is perfect—before any jury. His men were all at the White Man's House Saturday night—every one. Did not leave until eight o'clock Sunday morning. I verified that from Jake Leach, the proprietor. Brogan may be guilty, but we've got a heap of careful investigating to do, and the Parson's bulldozing tactics aren't going to make it any easier. "

She gazed through an open window toward the towering Ladrones, etched in moon silver and sapphire against the black sky. " He bulldozed that gang, then? " she asked, enigmatically.

" Tried to, and got himself into a jack-pot. "

" From which you saved him. It's strange, isn't it, Mr. Gains, that a mild-mannered preacher should turn out to be a trouble-maker, and you, Mr. Gains, an experienced gun-fighter, should be counseling moderation and caution in dealing with Badger Brogan! "

" I'd like to see the Walking X use plain horse sense, that's all. I've decided I don't want the foremanship—sorry I asked for it. I'm therefore disin-

terested. But I think the Parson's connection with the outfit will hinder solution of this crime."

"You wouldn't take command if I asked it?"

"No. I've got to be leaving soon. I don't suppose anyone around here cares how soon I go." His tone held a trace of bitterness.

"Why do you say that?"

"Oh, because." He turned stiffly away, whirled about suddenly, came to her, fists clenched. "Don't question me! You'd madden a man! I won't be responsible, with that renegade preacher hanging around——!"

She recoiled, stepped back from him. "What do you mean?" she demanded sharply.

The man laughed malevolently. "Forget it, like you did Speck Ballentine!"

She bit her lip, faced him in white-hot anger. "You cad——!"

"I'm sorry. I beg your pardon. Won't you forgive me?" He moved toward her, hands out, in the dimly lighted room. She stepped back to the door, flung it open.

"You haven't told me what your business with Uncle Dick was," she said, coldly. "You'd better enlighten me."

"Give me a day or two, please. Certain things must be settled up first. Dick Carroll trusted me, brought me here as his guest. I reckon you can do that much, Miss Joan!"

"Of course," she said shortly, and terminated

the interview. She left the office for the living room, rejoining Miss Leffenwell and Mrs. Loftus, and waited for the Parson to reappear for the late supper. Soon the meal was served, amid a strained silence on the part of the two men and the women.

The meal over, Joan summoned the Parson to the office again. The room was breeze-swept, the air damper, and they closed the windows. The Parson took a half hour recounting the scene with the Jaramillo men, the talk with Brogan, omitting the insult he had flung at her; told of the rustler's demand for six hundred steers to make up for alleged theft from the Lazy H, and last of all he revealed the contents of the tampered letter of Dick Carroll.

"My!" she exclaimed, "you've made much more progress than Gains, as an investigator, in spite of your quarrelsomeness, Parson!"

"Now you've got the facts, as far as I know them," the foreman concluded. "Brogan knows I know about that letter, and if I stay here he'll certainly wage open war on the Walking X, before we get further evidence warranting his arrest. This letter only shows a motive; we've got to learn that Brogan or his men were actually at Pine Shadow Spring. I've made a mess of things, Miss Joan, and the best course for me is to——"

"You've done yourself proud!" she interrupted. "I admire your fighting spirit, Parson John, against

those murderous renegades—so much that I can't really express it!" Her eyes glowed.

"Thanks for saying that, Miss Joan, but I'd better resign now, for your own good. I shouldn't have taken the job in the first place, but couldn't refuse you, the way you put it. It was my own selfishness, my wish to be near you, Miss Joan, that made me do it." He feared he had said too much.

"To be near me," she repeated slowly. She turned toward the window, gazed on the witching night vista of plain and mountain. "And now you talk of leaving—in the middle of the fight."

"It isn't that!" he shot out quickly. "Heaven knows I'd do—anything—'most to stay here——"

The red in her cheeks deepened, under the lamplight. She laughed lightly, to hide from him the knowledge that she understood. "You wouldn't strap on guns, Parson?" she probed, casually.

"No! Don't ask that. It would be ridiculous. Everyone knows a preacher can't use a gun, anyway." He laughed uneasily. Could she have a meaning in asking that question? He changed the subject quickly:

"I've lost my Sunday meeting hall—forgot to mention it. Brogan's threatened Don Alfredo; wants to muzzle me for fear I'd talk too much about the murder. I've decided to let the sermons ride a few weeks, until this thing is solved. I won't be a scrapper, in that respect at least, to complicate matters."

She was dubious about the wisdom of his decision, but did not press the matter, then. Nor did she mention the guns again. But she talked more about the intended resignation, and the result was that the Parson stayed on as foreman.

It had been an eventful Monday, a trying one for Joan, with the funeral and what followed, an exciting day for both the Parson and Carl Gains. The ensuing two days were quiet ones about the Walking X. Ned Raymond, Toro lawyer, brought news that Dick Carroll, anticipating trouble with Lonnie Hazen, had left a legally executed deed in his care, conferring the Walking X to Joan. A separate will settled a cash bequest on his maiden aunt.

Things began to happen on Thursday, with the discovery that a bunch of cattle, more than a hundred head, had disappeared from a draw facing Cow creek. Fences that had been cut and mended told the story. On Friday night another small herd was driven off, and Walking X guards that had been placed after the first theft were fired upon.

"It looks like they were beginning to collect that six hundred head," said Joan to the Parson. "What are you going to do?"

"I've given orders for a roundup of all stock south of the home base, to be bunched at Quemado Buttes under guard—Bill Minter's suggestion, and a good one, I think."

She nodded quickly, in obvious agreement.

But punchers about the old Carroll outfit began

to grumble about "a preacher foreman." Bill Minter, surreptitiously, was the chief of these, aided by his crony, the lame Zig Tinley. In town, Walking X hands were twitted about "the parson cow boss."

The Parson again offered to get out of the way, was refused. Through it all, Joan Willoughby held a stiff upper lip, and declared she would retain her preacher foreman until the last head was gone, if necessary.

Saturday evening the foreman talked with her. "I reckon I'm a hindrance, in several ways. You wanted to send for the sheriff, and I asked you to wait. These raids can't go on. You say you won't hear to any other foreman. All right, I'll stick—to the finish. I'm waiting for the return of Tumbleweed Jones, with a certain bit of evidence—something that may turn out foolish or may mean everything, before a jury. Just now we can't even show presence of Brogan or his men at Pine Shadow Spring that night. When we can, I'm going to arrest Brogan and his lieutenants, for murder."

Her eyes widened; she thrilled at the tone of the Parson's voice. "Alone?" she asked, eagerly.

"Alone, if needed."

"You'll have to put on guns, then, Parson John," she said slowly.

"I'd be helpless with a gun, Miss Joan—helpless as a baby. But I'll do my best to take these men to jail—if you'll still give me a few days' time." He

turned aside at her puzzled, somewhat impatient nod.

Next morning—and it was the Sabbath day, on which there was to be no sermon—the Parson went up onto Cat Mesa with Dad Walker's old gun.

CHAPTER XV

A KETTLE OF FISH

I GRANGER HUME, swear I won't ever kill another man!"

The lips of the Parson moved, and the words came innumerable times, often in a whisper, more often in a silent, swift thought process in the man's brain, as he walked back and forth in the shimmering heat of the morning—a desert October morning among the white glaring sand and creosote bush of Cat Mesa. His hand touched the square of paper in the tussock where he had previously placed it, turned it to reveal the six holes, some of them partly overlapping—all well toward the center. He rumpled the target, hooked another in the branch of a pungent shrub.

Again he walked back twenty paces, turning his back on the target. His hands hung limp at his sides. This time he did not take mental measure of the holster at his right hip and the protruding gun butt that he had grasped before. Instead, he drew

out the weapon carelessly, transferred it to his left hand, and let it hang down, muzzle to the ground.

Suddenly he whirled, the forearm, wrist, fingers and thumb flexing in unison; the barrel of the gun went up at the left hip and belched its charge of lead, once, twice, and again and again until the six shots spat toward the paper. The Parson strode over to the target, more rapidly this time; he looked at the perforated mark, smiled in satisfaction at the story told there. Never had either hand of Granger Hume been swifter, steadier, surer, than now. Suddenly he holstered the hot weapon as the silent words of his oath raced through his mind again.

"I don't know why I'm doing this, anyway," he muttered, in disgust. "I'll never do it—never make use of that gift of course, or whatever it is. I've sworn it, and besides, I know the old gun fever would come on me again if I faced a human being!"

The Parson's right hand darted to the gaping holster, trembled, went limp. His eyes, narrowing on the arroyo edge slightly to the left, continued to stare in unbelief. For a long moment he did not remove his gaze. Finally he shrugged, laughed lightly.

"Parson John, you're seeing things!" he murmured. "I'd sworn that was a man's hat, over the edge of the wash, plain as day! Gosh, I had a touch of gun fever—then—sure!"

He trod ahead again to place another square of paper, for one more practice, the object of which he

confessed himself was futile. As he turned, a round gray object, peaked at top, darted into momentary view and withdrew. A sombrero, and no mistake about it this time!

Without making a motion toward his holster, the Parson felt a quiver run through wrist and fingers. He backed away, eyes on the spot where the hat had been. "I've got it—got it!" he muttered hoarsely, "and it serves me right, for killing poor old Dad. If that's one of Badger Brogan's men, it would serve me right, I reckon, if he'd shoot. I've got no business with guns any more!" A low groan broke from his lips as he continued to withdraw. He wondered why the fellow did not shoot.

Abruptly the hat came up again, and with it an arm and shoulder, then suddenly the full figure of a man, arms waving. "For the love uh cactus, Parson!" cried the voice, and the slim, warped frame slouched toward him.

"What in all git-out are yuh doin' yere, Parson John, with a gun, drillin' holes through a five-inch mark straight in the eye from the hip? I swear I wouldn't believed it, Parson, if I didn't see it with my own bleary old eyes." He reached out a hand. "Lend me yore Durham."

"Well, Hip, what are you doing here?" demanded the Parson, taken aback, chagrined that his secret should be known.

"An' with the left wing you plugged 'er as good's with the right! Doggone it, Parson, if you haint

a match for Badger Brogan an' Granger Hume theirselves! Where'n Texas did yuh learn t' use a pistol the same as that!"

"Just put on the gun for fun, Hip. I'm a rotten shot." The Parson was impatient. "Slow."

"Slow, like a scorpion's tail. A rotten shot, huh? If yuh didn't beat any shootin' I ever see, Parson, with that there old six-gun, I'll shore eat it!" Hipkins surveyed the other with a critical eye. "Wear yore guns right far down on yore hams—like yuh was used to it, too!"

"What brought you here?" repeated the Parson, in better humor, resigned to make the best of things.

"*Oyé,* that's what I come for, to tell yuh suthin'. After that ruckus you an' Gains had with Badger Brogan, I got to thinkin'. Thinks I, Hip, yo're a good for nothin' old gin-tank most uh the time, heart busted bustin' broncs, anyhow, so why not make yoreself some use around this yere Walkin' X when there's a nest uh snakes tryin' to hamstring Miz Joan an' Leffenwell. Jake Leach is yore friend, Hip, an' why not use him?"

The veteran puncher spat copiously, licked his cigarette. "I've been consumin' licker, aplenty, an' you kin give me cats if you want to, Parson, but it was for a purpose——"

The listener grinned. "Hurry along, Hip, what did you start to tell me?"

"Comin' to it. Comin' to it! Jake, thinks I, Jake uh the White Man's House is Hip's friend, in

spite all them Badger Brogan scrubs hangin' round there makin' it their headquarters since they arrove. So you notice I haint been around the ranch sence Thursday? Nussir. You calc'lated I was drunk again, I reckon, you an' Miz Joan?"

The Parson smiled; he had not even missed Hipkins, but did not say so.

"Well, I took considerable gin, but I wasn't onwieldy, to speak, durin' that whole time. But me an' Jake done a mite of talkin', durin' them two days, swappin' insults an' narratin' our old experiences up on the Cimarron. Upshot of it was, Jake swallered some uh his own licker—not enough to git laughable, mind yuh, Parson, either. But he spilled a purty kettle uh fish, Jake did, an' no mistake!"

"Go on—tell it," urged the other, keenly interested.

"Las' Saturday night, when Badger Brogan an' Jerry Gore an' Luis Escobar went to bed in their front corner room, Jake figgered that, there bein' three uh them, he'd make 'em comfortabler, packin' in an extry wire couch, there bein' only one bed in that room. 'Bout 9:30, that was. An'—doggone it—them three waddies wasn't in that room when Jacob got there!"

"Um-m!" The Parson's lids contracted. "That's mighty important, Hipkins."

"Shore is. An' Jake don't know yet what time them spiders come back, either, becose he went to bed about one a.m. But Brogan an' his two

paisanos was in that room snug an' neat next Sunday mornin'. Jake told me confidential they couldn't got out uh that room without passin' him in the evenin' onless they went out the winder to the roof uh the Chink restaurant next door."

"Would Jake be willing to testify to that in court, you think, Hip?"

"Dunno about that—he said them waddies hadn't paid their bill yet, an' I reckon he's half-quarter scared they'll disremember how much they owe. Lestwise, he told me that, easy-like, jest as if he didn't care if it did git out. Jake haint easy scared, yuh know, Parson, an' if he took it into his haid to side agin' Badger Brogan's gang, he'd do it. You know that, Parson—even if he does sling drinks in his own saloon."

"Where's your horse?" asked the Parson, moving toward his own mount in a clump of mesquite. "How'd you know I was here?"

"In the arroyo. Miz Joan said you headed this way, an' I trailed along till I bumped into you. Now tell me 'bout that gun stunt, Parson. Where'd yuh learn it?"

"Listen, Hipkins," unbuckling belt and swinging off gun and holster, "I want your word not to say anything about my shooting up here. I'll explain later on. Not a word to anyone, understand?"

"I'd shore like to noise it around, Parson, but if you insist, I won't mention it even to a greaser."

"I don't want you to mention it to Gains and

Miss Joan, especially. And what Jake said ought to be kept dark too. Will you?"

"Shore, cowboy! You an' me'll work on this, on the q. t., alone, eh?"

"Yes, sir, for the present."

They rode in together toward the Walking X, after the Parson had tucked his gun, belt and holster in the blanket roll behind his saddle in which he had brought them. Hipkins continued talkative. One thing he said interested his companion greatly. "Jes Mangel's taken to drink, worryin' over talk that Badger wants to take over his outfit. An' Jedge Loftus has decided to sell."

They reached the ranch and separated. It was a drowsy, peaceable Sunday morning, and the Parson idled about the ranch house gallery, smoking his pipe, thinking, waiting for the return of Joan Willoughby, who had ridden off alone. When she came in, from the direction of Quemado Buttes, he promptly laid before her what Hipkins had learned from Jake Leach.

"It's the most important bit of evidence on the murder we've got yet," he said, "and if Tumble can prove Jaramillo men were actually at the spring, our case is clear. As for the rustling, I am going out tonight to get something positive in that direction."

"Then you will arrest them?" she asked slowly.

"I'll make the try."

"And you won't use guns? But how?"

For a moment he faced her in silence. Finally he answered: "If I didn't think I was able, Miss Joan, I'd send for the sheriff. If you want a gun-fighter for a foreman I'd advise you to hire Gains. I can't shoot a man—have talked against it for six years."

"You wouldn't shoot a man—even a snake in human form who hanged Uncle Dick and Soapy Johnson?" she asked, evenly.

He thought of his oath. "I couldn't even do that, Miss Joan," he said slowly. "Why do you think that I, a parson, should try to use guns?"

"I was just asking." she replied quickly. "I have faith in you, that you will manage it, someway."

Since there was no church service in Toro this Sunday morning, the Parson spent the day at the Walking X. One bunch of cattle had been driven up to Quemado Buttes Saturday, and the foreman did not insist that the hands work on Sunday. Besides, he was satisfied to allow some stock to remain near Cow creek, as "bait" for his investigation that night.

During the afternoon while the punchers were lounging about in front of the bunk house watching Hipkins' efforts to ride a vicious, red-eyed bronco—after having duly fortified himself against his weak heart—the proceedings were interrupted by a clatter from the cook house. Zig Tinley limped with surprising agility into the open, a butcher knife

whizzing past his ear. His cheek already trickled red.

The Parson, coming up from the *parada* grounds, heard shooting, saw the dust fly under the lame puncher's feet. He heard the shrill, virago notes of Inocencia. More shots from the cook house, and big Bill Minter, his beefy frame wavering, lunged forward, arms reaching out in grotesque fashion. His head and shoulders were splattered crimson, and red dripped from his gun hand. His weapon was gone.

"That she-devil's murdered him!" barked Tramer, leaping up. As others jumped to their feet the portly Inocencia, huge bare arms swinging, in one hand a formidable looking six-shooter, trotted out in the wake of Minter. Seeing the gun, the rescuers suddenly halted, while the blood-bespattered Minter staggered toward the bunk house door, cursing fiercely. Hipkins, disregarding all peril, left the back of the bronco and sprinted toward the belligerents.

The *moza,* her dusky double chin tilted up defiantly, tossed her black head, folded up the gun against her fat waist, placed arms akimbo, and grinned, showing pearly teeth, her lustrous eyes sparkling.

"What yuh do to him?" snapped Hipkins, turning on her. Darting forward, he wrenched the gun from her hand.

"Ah git even!" grimaced the *moza.* "He no try more treecks on Inocencia!"

Tramer had reached the near-butchered Minter. He came out of the bunk house slowly, face sober, drew the punchers around to the cook house, stuck his head into the door. Picking up an iron pot, he held it up for inspection, drained the remaining dregs of crimson from it. "Beet juice blood!" chuckled Tramer, deeply.

"I hope it was hot; serves them two right!" grunted the buster, while the well-pleased Inocencia strutted back into the kitchen, her revenge at last achieved.

The gang gathered around Bill Minter and Tinley, forming a circle, grinned at one another, and then at the two hazers, until, after many solemn questions and sage comments, the sullen pair of jokesmiths broke and ran, mounted and galloped north.

"We'll git squared with that hull damn outfit yet," growled Minter, when they had slowed down. "I'm tired bein' bossed by a preacher, an' that ain't no sheep-herder's dream."

"So'm I," assented Zig. "When yuh goin' to see Badger?"

"Tomorrer!"

Back at the ranch house shortly after dark the Parson saddled his horse and rode northeast, alone. He proceeded above Pine Shadow Spring to a distant *zacate* pasture in a little valley on the slopes of

which a small bunch of cattle had bedded down unguarded. Here he waited, in the shadows of a clump of trees. Toward midnight four dots appeared on the horizon, in the moonlight. One of them cut over toward the waiting man.

The Parson wore Dad Walker's gun in the holster at his hip. Through his head raced the words, "I, Granger Hume, swear I won't ever kill another man." To hush the words, he uttered a whispered prayer. "Lord, save me from that terrible trembling hand tonight—and I'll promise not to shoot. I must take this man prisoner."

He drew his mount deeper into the shadows of a clump of piñon pines, walked forward to the edge of the brilliant moonlight, just within the black shadow, and waited for the horseman who had cut off from the group.

The rider suddenly drew up, a hundred yards away, and turned his horse around in a circle twice. That was some sort of a signal.

CHAPTER XVI

GAINS PLAYS A HAND

HORSE and rider remained stationary that scant distance. In answer to his signal, the three punchers on the horizon, the crest of the slope, separated. Two jogged slowly to the west, the distance between them widening; the other came at a lope toward the waiting man in the saddle.

The Parson's object was not primarily to save the fifty-odd head of cattle in this particular swale, but he expected to do that incidentally with the taking of one man prisoner. With one of Badger Brogan's gang caught red-handed and taken back to the Walking X, he would have proof that the Lazy H was doing the rustling, and that would halt further raids, temporarily at least. Then, on the way back with the prisoner, out of gun range, the Parson intended to shoot liberally into the air, giving the rustlers warning of the presence of Walking X men, and saving the little herd.

The loping rider neared the man who had given

the signal. "I'll have to take 'em both," muttered the Parson, his jaw hardening. He drew out his forty-five gun. There was no special need for this now, for he felt certain that he could sweep his weapon from its holster swiftly enough when the time arose. But in the alternating shadow and moonlight there would be no advantage in the draw. The man first sighting the other would have the whip hand. The advantage was the Parson's and he rejoiced as he saw the waiting horseman turn with the other's approach and proceed at a steady walk toward him. If they should pass the clump of trees, it would be easy.

They came on, toward the Walking X man's hiding place. For an instant the Parson turned his gaze toward the other two. They were taking the slope, one on each side, above the cattle. The maneuver was plain; should the animals heave up in sudden fright, they could be blocked in the direction of the Walking X, with only one way to run—down the swale toward Cow creek and the Lazy H boundary.

The pair approaching the trees were thirty feet away. Abruptly they halted, and the Parson caught the words of one of them:

"You cross the draw, Zack. We don't want them cow-critters to scare up, leastwise not till we're set. Badger don't want the fence busted if we kin help it. We got a big day ahead, to git these goin'

straight for the Ladrones, to join them others waitin' at Monte Largo."

The other grunted, turned his mount down the slope, passing the piñon trees too far away to please the Parson. At that instant the remaining puncher wheeled about and came straight toward the tree shadows.

The Parson's heart leaped, for the first rider had got well out of shouting distance. The old thrill of the guns surged through the veins of the Walking X man; but he resolved not to touch the hammer. He stepped quickly into the moonlight, revolver barrel slightly elevated on the rider.

"Lift 'em, hombre!" he shot out, sharply.

The fellow was slow in complying—so slow that a wave of indecision palled the challenger. The rustler's answer was a motion as though going for his gun.

The Parson might have brought his adversary to the ground, but he did not. Confronted with the need of firing on the human silhouette before him, he felt his fingers weaken, and Dad Walker's pistol dropped to the sun-cured grass.

On that instant, the outlaw had his own gun leveled. Only sight of the falling weapon prevented his firing. He came forward slowly, and with gun still leveled, slid from the saddle.

"Dang me if it ain't the Parson!" exploded the rustler, a red-whiskered individual whom the other had seen during the saloon melee. He swept up the

Parson's gun. "You ort known better'n try to shoot pistols, preacher-man! I got business with yuh, mister minister. Where's yore hawss?"

The nicker of the animal behind the trees gave answer. The bearded one jabbed his prisoner with his six-shooter. "Won't Badger be plumb elated when I come into camp with this gospel shooter! Hombre, you don't how narrer yuh come from th' gates uh pearl—an' never will. Fer a fact, Parson, if yuh knowed what Badger's idee is when he gits a holt uh you, you'd shore start prayin', now! Holy——!"

Slowly the hands of the rustler went up, his fingers releasing the gun he held, which slipped to his feet. A pair of eyes gleamed sarcastically in the shadow, and a glinting rod of steel sat level in the patchy moonlight facing the outlaw. Carl Gains moved forward.

"Not so fast, Gringo Charley," murmured Gains. "Now we'll all trot back to the Walking X." He lifted the rustler's gun from the ground, took the Parson's weapon from the outlaw's hip pocket, where he had shoved it, and handed it to its owner. Back of the piñons there were two horses where the Walking X foreman had left one. Gains swung up to the saddle, the Parson mounted silently, and the armed man snapped orders to Gringo to climb onto his bronc standing in the moonlight.

"Now ride down the draw!" shot out Gains, and

the outlaw loped through the scrub growth, with the two men flanking him. They reached the creek, and the Parson spoke. "Better shoot to let them know we're here, and save the cattle."

"No," answered Gains. "They're too many, might outrun us, with this fellow. We need him. Besides, we'll get all those cows, in time."

The foreman checked the impulse to take the initiative and fire his own guns. Perhaps Gains was right. At any rate he had proved himself ablest to cope with this situation. This strange guest at the Carroll ranch was not afraid to use his gun!

At one o'clock in the morning they reached the ranch, rousing sleepy-eyed punchers when an unused room in the adobe bunk house row was resorted to as a jail. The one window was boarded up with heavy timbers and a padlock put on the door. Joan Willoughby, roused by the hammering and loud talking, dressed and appeared to ask questions, as did Miss Leffenwell. Gains told them, as he had told the pop-eyed Hipkins and the other hands. The Parson looked on, listened in silence, and finally went to his room.

"I'm a fine specimen of a foreman," he reflected, sadly. "I'd be a good one to try to arrest Badger Brogan and his whole gang! Little good that practice shooting did. I reckon I'll get out of the way now, and let Gains run things. I'm done for, with the old gun fever worse than ever!"

He sat for a time on the edge of the bed, smoking

his pipe, thinking. He heard the mutter of voices below, where lanterns bobbed in the darkness. The men under him, as foreman, would have scant opinion of his leadership, after this. He thought of Joan Willoughby and how hard it was going to be for him to leave the ranch—how much he would miss her. The promise he had made her to arrest the Jaramillo ring-leaders plagued him, for he had intended using his guns, outgeneraling them, without taking life.

What Gains was doing out there in the swale, how he had arrived, and how much of the first gun-play with Gringo Charley he had witnessed, the Parson did not know. "He probably saw me go, and followed, thinking he might help a poor preacher in trouble," he mused, morosely. He was roused by a gentle knock at the door, and opened it.

Joan Willoughby stood before him. "You went over there armed, after all," she said, smiling, standing in the doorway.

"I was a fool. Gains is a better man. You'd be wise to hire——"

"I don't believe Gains is a better man," she rejoined, evenly. The Parson's eyes narrowed, in suspicion that she might know his past.

"For foreman," she added promptly, "even if he is a better gunman!"

A voice from the living room. "Miss Joan! Joan! Mr. Gains looking for you, dear!"

The Parson bowed, drew back, and Joan hurried

on. Gains had strolled again to the moonlit gallery. Miss Leffenwell nodded her dainty head. "Mr. Gains will be angry, dear," she whispered, laughing a little. "He heard your voices, back there!"

"Thank you," said the girl sweetly, and joined the guest from the south. Gains was standing stiffly before the partly opened door, frowning deeply. "I didn't intend to interrupt," he said, petulantly, "but I thought you'd want to hear what I had to say."

"Surely."

"I stayed on longer than I intended—glad of it now. My suspicions are correct, about your good friend, Toro's Holy Man! You'll want the proof, of course. Hipkins got drunk during the afternoon—riding that bronc was too much for his heart—and when Minter came back he blabbed about the Parson's gun work, up on Cat Mesa yesterday morning, with a target. The old boy's whipping into practice!"

"How do you know that?" she asked dryly.

"Oh, Minter mentioned it. Of course, he didn't know who the Parson was."

"That doesn't prove a thing. Anyone might practice with a revolver, surely."

"And center every shot, from the hip, and with both hands!" Gains laughed. "All right. Then how's this: When I handed the preacher his gun back there in the draw tonight, his hands were bare,

and I glimpsed his wrists. Ask him to let you see 'em if you think I'm lying, Miss Joan!"

The girl smiled faintly. "He is Granger Hume, then?"

"Granger Hume—yes—*but he's lost his nerve!*"

"Really?" She was sarcastic. "And why do you say that?"

"The Granger Hume of the old days would never let Gringo Charley pull a gun on him. He acted like he had stage fright—dropped his pistol when the rustler drew."

"Too bad," she said, softly. "How lucky you happened along, just in time to save him!"

Gains frowned. "I had a special reason. Granger Hume is my prisoner, lady!" He strode back and-forth, hands behind his back, watching the girl through half-closed eyes.

"Your *prisoner!* What do you mean?"

"I'll tell you now my business with Dick Carroll. Came here from El Paso with you, true enough. I'm Speck Ballentine's chief deputy—from Loma Grande—on the trail of Badger Brogan. Went to El Paso on a false tip that Brogan had gone that way, just over the New Mexico line. Suspicion of rustling—that's the only charge against the Jaramillo outfit. And there I got wind of the presence of one Granger Hume in Badger Brogan's band. One look at the said killer told me he was a fake—and then I got a look at this Toro Holy Man. That was enough!" He chuckled unpleasantly.

The girl's lips were white. "You are a deputy, of Speck Ballentine. But what is the charge against the Parson?"

"Murder."

"Of whom!"

"Never mind. He won't ever hang, lady!" Gains continued to pace back and forth, a smile curving his thin lips at this stage.

She was silent, but wanted to cry out, knowing well his meaning. Gains was not satisfied with an inference. "Never hang. Speck Ballentine's going to put pistols in his hands, right in the streets of Loma Grande, if necessary. Speck won't ever die happy till he's met this tiger-man, gun for gun. Funny part of it is, the tiger's turned out a tabby. Preachin's made Granger Hume a woman; he's turned yellow. Always was a coward——"

"That's not true!" Her eyes blazed. "He may have changed, because he is not the one he was, with a whole new outlook on life, abhoring gun fighting and killing! But he isn't yellow, Deputy Sheriff Gains!"

"Watch how easily I take him, then!" he flung out bitterly, enraged at her unexpected championship of the fugitive.

She turned away, walked nervously to and fro on the moonlit gallery. Suddenly she faced him. "You shan't arrest him!" she cried. "You shan't reveal his identity. He has lived down his past, paid for it many times over with his good work here,

where he is loved by everyone. What good would it do, to take him back, where all his old enemies of the Bull Mesa gang are in power?"

"It would do Speck Ballentine a mite of good, Miss Joan!"

Her fists clenched. "Oh, I see it, now!" she moaned. "Now, when he can't use his gun any more, you'd take him back to be—be shot down! How brave of you—and even Speck Ballentine!"

"Sorry you're taking it so hard," soothed the man, half in mockery. "With me, it's in the line of business."

She had grown suddenly calm. "You are determined?" she asked, coldly.

"Absolutely."

"No argument of mine will change you?"

The deputy took out his cigarette case, produced a smoke. "I'm human," he murmured, softly. "Too human at times, I think. I'm honest—I hate that hombre's posing around as a white man—especially around here. I've changed my mind about leaving so soon—for bigger game." He eyed her intently.

Her figure was tense as she asked: "What is the bigger game?"

"That's a secret. Maybe it's putting a feather to my cap by putting the whole of Badger Brogan's gang behind the bars. To do that, I'd want to work here awhile as foreman." He drew deeply on his cigarette, gray eyes studying her. "You see, the

Parson don't know we know—and he's not likely to run away. I could forget my duty awhile, even, because Speck doesn't know what I've sniffed into here!"

"You want me to discharge the Parson?" she asked, her throat contracting slightly.

"Fire him, or I'll pack him off to Loma Grande before daylight."

Her eyes glinted with anger, but she answered in calm tones. "Very well, Mr. Gains. You will be foreman tomorrow."

CHAPTER XVII

FIRED—AND FAMOUS

IN the morning after a late breakfast, at which the chief topic was the prisoner in the bunk house, the Parson went to the men's quarters to talk over with Minter the further bunching of the cattle at Quemado Buttes, two miles north of the ranch house. It had been Minter's idea to put them there under guard, on the plea of better grass, although the foreman had argued that they should be brought closer in. But the Parson did not get to talk to Minter, for Joan came down from the house to break the news that he was no longer to be foreman. She did it with a minimum of pain to him.

"You said you should like to resign," she began, "and much as I should like you to stay on, perhaps it would be better if Mr. Gains took charge today."

The Parson nodded slowly; he felt sure the episode of the night before had led her to put in charge the man who had proved himself ablest in such an emergency.

"I'll gladly step out," he answered, crestfallen, trying to hide his feelings. "Because, as I said yesterday, Mr. Gains is the better man. I'll do what I can, Miss Joan, to run that gang down, and I'll see the other owners about a law and order organization. I reckon it's idle to wait for Tumbleweed any longer."

A sudden suspicion smote him as he studied the large serious eyes of the girl. "I hope it isn't anything personal—about me, Miss Joan?" he questioned.

"No, if it was personal, I'd want you for foreman—always," she replied, and hurried away.

The Parson gathered together his meager effects, including Dad Walker's old gun—he had left his small box trunk at the "parsonage" at Don Alfredo's place. In the midst of this work Joan Willoughby came to him again. "Don't leave the ranch," she pleaded. "Please stay on, as a hand, under Mr. Gains."

The range minister thought it over. "Thanks, Miss Joan," he said finally, "I'd love to do that!"

But an hour later Gains informed the Parson he could not use him. "I think it's a good rule for a man who has been boss to go elsewhere," affirmed the new foreman. "It's hard for him to take orders under another man—you understand?" The words, while spoken genially enough, had a false ring to them, for on the range, "orders" are seldom

resorted to. Joan, who had heard, maintained silence.

The Parson merely nodded, gathered up his gunny sack and blanket roll, tied them to his saddle, the sack, containing books, riding on the pommel. As he took the stirrups Joan gave him her hand.

"Come out often. I want you to know how much I appreciate what you have done; and I'd like you to advise me in future."

The man smiled; her words seemed sincere, in spite of her action in dismissing him. "There's only one thing I'd suggest," he said. "I dislike to mistrust a man, but Minter has been acting a little off color, and you'd better have Mr. Gains check what he does. Oh, yes, and don't let Inocencia butcher that prisoner. I reckon Mr. Gains will look after the rustling matter and Gringo, now he's in charge. Good-by and good luck!" He rode south and did not look back.

He decided he would not hunt for another job at present, but would take the opportunity to interview the other ranch owners and lay all the facts before them. No one realized more than he the difficult task of rousing the range to action, and he did not want to start a war, in any event. But a law and order organization, under Eli Becker as deputy sheriff, might go a long way toward halting Badger Brogan's terrorism.

Making the "parsonage" in the Painted Pony his headquarters, he started out before noon that

Monday morning. He first rode over to see Jes Mangel, his old boss, laid part of the proof of Brogan's guilt before him—the part that would not balk further investigation—and asked his help in assembling a posse to arrest the Jaramillo men.

"I think if we get an overwhelming number, owners, cowboys and townsmen, we can do it without bloodshed," explained the Parson, "and that is the best way."

But Mangel was in no humor to incur the enmity of the new power on the range. He pleaded off, said he was rushed with preparations for the fall roundup, and besides, made it plain that he considered the preacher hardly a fit man to lead such an undertaking.

"You lead it, Mr. Mangel."

"Can't do it; I'm mighty sorry, Parson. Fact is, too, I understand Brogan wants to buy me out, before the beef roundup."

Disappointed, the Parson cut off to the south toward Judge Loftus' Bar Double L. At the trail that intercepted the Toro road, he met the judge riding with two of his men. Before he could present the matter, the cowman had bad news.

"I've agreed to let Brogan have the Bar Double L on long time." The Judge's worried features worked nervously. "I reckon it's the only thing a man can do, Parson."

The coercive force of Badger Brogan's tactics was never better evidenced. In view of the man's plight,

the Parson did not state his mission, for Loftus not only dreaded a war like that faced by the Walking X, but probably stood in fear of such a fate as Dick Carroll had suffered.

The range minister returned to town, eyes hardened a trifle, his brain burning with the complexity of the problem faced by Joan Willoughby. "I almost wish I hadn't taken that oath," he mused, as he rode up to the hitch rack of the Painted Pony, "but even if I hadn't I reckon I couldn't ever handle a gun against a man. Something inside of me turns over when I try it, like I did with Gringo Charley, and I see a picture of poor old Dad Walker running toward me, and then—what I did!"

He saw one or two others—enough to convince him of the futility of his newest plan. Only Nick Parsons, the giant blacksmith whom he had recently married, showed courage to antagonize Brogan. The blacksmith looked him up, rolled his eyes, flexed his huge arm muscles. "I understand the Jaramillos are layin' for you, Parson John," said Nick. "Oh, Lord, say the word, an' I'll toss Brogan and his gang clear over Cat Mesa, with my two hands!" The Parson smiled, shook his head, knowing how idle the blacksmith's boast was in the face of guns. Hip Hipkins was loyal, wanted to raise a posse, but the Parson had already learned that such a move was impossible.

Meanwhile, in spite of Joan's effort to make it appear that the Parson had resigned voluntarily,

gossip spread to Toro that he had been removed; many extended friendly greeting, offered regrets. The range minister was popular; but he was not taken seriously as a war captain, nor did he indicate he wanted to be so taken. At this juncture he found himself famous. One other bit of gossip reached Toro, revealing the same preacher as a marvel with the six-shooter. Hipkins' unguarded words to Minter and Zig Tinley had gone far.

"What is this talk I hear about your trick work with hardware?" asked Don Alfredo.

"Who said anything about it?" asked the other, uneasily.

"Duffy Butler was in awhile ago. Said Minter told him you was up on the mesa putting holes into a five-inch target at twenty paces, with never a miss, and with both hands."

"How's Minter know all that?"

"Don't know. If Hip was telling it, I'd say it was liquor." The Spaniard laughed. "But folks in town all know it—and believe it, Parson."

"I'll tell you something, Don Alfredo—it came from Hipkins—every word of it!" trying to laugh it off. "I'm the worst hand with a six-shooter on the range, if you want to know the truth."

The Parson spent that Monday night at his old bunk at the Fiddleback. Tuesday was uneventful. No effort was made to turn the prisoner at the Walking X over to Becker. Gains had decided to hold Gringo Charley, without revealing his capture for

the time being. Raids on the Carroll outfit had ceased; no cattle were driven off Tuesday night, Wednesday night or Thursday night.

Others had heard the story of the Parson's gun work, and believed it, for the average mind grasps at the unusual and the spectacular, glories in hero worship. Not all were prompted by these motives, however. There was Badger Brogan.

In the Lazy H ranch house Friday at sundown, just after Lonnie Hazen had moved out the last of his furniture, the Jaramillo chief discussed this and other subjects with Jerry Gore and Luis Escobar.

" If he's a pistol fighter, or if he ain't, he's reached the end of his rope, " asserted Brogan, glowering. " He's been dangerous from the start, knowin' about that letter of Dick Carroll to Joe Stack. Now he's been tryin' to stir up the range agin me, been talkin' vigilance committee with Jes Mangel an' some more —I got a friend or two in Toro that tells me things! We was fools to wait this long. But we're jist about ready to cash in on all them brands we bought, an' with the range buffaloed and scared to raise a finger, now's the time to strike. I want him out of the way —pronto! "

" But ain't it dangerous, after Dick Carroll an' Soapy Johnson? " queried Gore, shrugging.

Brogan ripped out a curse. " That's fer me to decide, ain't it? There ain't a man on this range that's got guts to do anything account of Carroll an' Johnson, is they—no matter what these yalla skunks

round here thinks. If you an' Luis was on yore toes, I reckon you could git that preacher without leavin' any clew, like we done with them others. An' there's one other hombre's got to go, the same way." Brogan's tight-skinned countenance drew into a hard, glistening mask.

"Who?" demanded Gore, throwing forward his red-veined face.

"Gains. Granger's got him spotted fer what he is—a deputy from Loma Grande."

"U-m!" Jerry Gore rose suddenly, strode back and forth quickly. "Things is gittin' hot, Badger. I didn't like th' looks of that hombre from the time I first set eyes onto him!"

"It's up to you an' Luis!" flung out Brogan. "If you two cain't do it, I've got men that kin. Zack an' Laigs Gournard an' Granger's rarin' to go when I say the word."

"Leave it to us! *Seguro!*" purred Escobar, fingering the point of a knife that he had withdrawn from under his shirt and belt.

"Yeah," assented Gore. "Leave it to us. But how, an' when?"

"Now—tonight, or tomorrer. Yuh don't need to do it in town. The preacher's stickin' his nose into the Lazy H everyday. He's watchin' th' Cow crick line. So's Gains. Likely they both have been seein' some of our cattle movements. If yuh pot 'em somewheres along our line, there's plenty ground to cover 'em over in. They'll on'y be missin'! Sabe?" His

jet eyes glowed avidly behind their slitted lids. "You an' Luis got the guts?"

"*Si!*" The Mexican leaned forward, flipped the knife into the stuffed head of an antlered deer rack, between the glass eyes.

Gore nodded slowly, his hand on his pistol butt. "I'll watch the upper end and Luis kin watch the line below. It'll be easy if either one of 'em comes our way!"

And on the morrow, while the two assassins lay in ambush in the bosque of Cow creek, at widely separated points, the Parson set out from Toro toward the boundary line of the two outfits.

CHAPTER XVIII

DEATH RIDES IN THE BOSQUE

THERE was a reason for the Parson's ride toward Cow creek, other than keeping an eye on Badger Brogan's range to eastward; the Jaramillo chief had jumped at conclusions when he had said that the Parson had been spying along the line; only once since Monday had the discharged foreman been seen near the Walking X. But now, in addition to keeping a sharp lookout for the stolen cattle on Lazy H range, the Parson had another mission; a visit at the Carroll ranch, on a summons from Joan Willoughby.

Hipkins had ridden in that Saturday morning with news from Miss Joan that the ladies interested in the church organization were to meet that afternoon at the Walking X ranch house, and that they desired his attendance. Incidentally the veteran horse-breaker denied any knowledge of talking about the Cat Mesa gun practice. "But I reckon I done it, fool drunk, that afternoon, becose Minter says I

did. I'm plumb sorry, an' if yo'll forgive me, I'll lay down my good-for-nothing old life for you some day, Pars' John."

The Parson had left town at eleven o'clock, earlier than necessary for the meeting at the Carroll house at two in the afternoon, taking the lower trail deliberately to see what he could see. Vague rumors had reached Don Alfredo of strange cattle movements, and Alfredo had dropped word to the Parson.

This was not wholly a surprise, for Brogan's men had been unduly absent from town for some days, and, the Parson thought, strangely quiet since the disappearance of Gringo Charley.

The same vague promptings had induced the discharged foreman to take along Dad Walker's gun. When he reached the sparsely timbered cottonwood bosque along the creek, he dismounted, loosened his blanket roll and buckled on belt and holster. There was no telling whom of Brogan's band he might encounter, and the weapon might serve him well without actually being fired.

The Parson remounted and rode up into the more thickly wooded watershed. The utter silence of the midday bosque, under the mistletoe-laden cottonwoods, tornillo, and alders, oppressed him. No sounds came from sluggish Cow creek, not even a jay screeched its harsh note. It was ominous, and the Parson's thoughts leaped to the time when this same stretch of woodland had been the scene of a bitter range feud. Then suddenly he heard voices.

Riding forward cautiously, he reached a bend in the trail, to the east of which stretched a marshy zacate bottom of the Lazy H. Drawing rein, he listened intently. Abruptly came a woman's high-pitched words, as though in alarm.

The Parson could not make out sharp exchanges that followed, but heard a man's voice. He swung down quickly, and went forward on foot, in among the slender trees and underbrush. A scant minute of this, and he saw the hulks of horses, partly revealed where they hugged the side of the trail. Two riders sat in the saddles, a man and a woman. One he saw instantly was Joan Willoughby and in a moment the leaves of the thicket parted on the features of Carl Gains.

The discharged foreman would have turned back, mounted and rode forward openly toward them but for the position of the horses and the note of excitement he had heard in the girl's voice. He unholstered his gun, moved a step forward; if these two were hiding from some unseen enemy, the Parson might render help. Then he saw that Gains' mount was blocking the side of the trail, the man was gripping the bridle of her black horse with one hand. He heard her calm but distinct words:

"Well, what do you propose to do, since you have forgotten you are a gentleman?"

The man was silent, sat his mount in tense attitude for a long moment. When he spoke his words were scarcely audible to the listening range minister:

"I want you, girl, and I want you to listen to me!"

Her tone was icy. "And you want to force your words on me. Let go that cheek strap!"

"You might run away——"

The girl's arm leaped, fingers flexing on the quirt that dangled from her wrist. Gains' long arm thrust outward, parried the blow, and his hand wrenched the whip from hers. "Expected that!" he said quietly. "I like a girl with spirit."

"You are a coward, Gains! You a gentleman—Bah!"

The Parson's fingers tightened about Dad Walker's gun; he started from behind a clump of alders, ears straining, wondering if sight and hearing were deceiving him. His frame stiffened, on the verge of darting ahead, when the girl's swift movement arrested him.

She had flung herself forward, with the speed of a cougar, against her pony's neck, her knuckles beating frantically at Gains' hand at the bridle, her light spurs jabbing as her trim boots snapped forward. The horse leaped, but Gains' steel fingers held, and the animal was brought around with a speed that would have tossed her from the saddle but for her expert horsemanship.

Gains wheeled again beside her, close against the thicket. "I'm not a fool!" he snapped. "I know I've made you mad, and you likely hate me, now! But you got to listen to me. Maybe I'm not even a

gentleman—there's times when a man can't be, when a pretty woman gets into his blood. I've been loco over you from the time I first saw you in that stage from El Paso. Why'd you think I wanted to be foreman? Why? Not to play ranch boss—I got a job of my own! Why'd I want that preacher out of the way? You know! For near a week now I've hunted you out—given you a chance—to be pleasant. Why'd I cook up this ride to the bosque?" His eyes gleamed on her. "I'll tell you! When I first saw you in that stage I was going to have you. I'm as good as Speck Ballentine—and as good as that other renegade that's lost his nerve! I swore I'd kiss you if I had to kill 'em both to do it, and by God, I mean it. Just one, and I'll be a gentleman again, and we'll ride out of this bosque, and I'll show you that Carl Gains can take Badger Brogan to Loma Grande. Please, Joan, or I swear I'm loco enough to—take it." He crowded her, reached for her with his free arm. She sank spurs, crushed her mount into the underbush, but the animal was held.

The Parson darted into the open trail. "Don't do it, Gains!" he warned. "I'll blow your head off! Apologize to the lady!"

The deputy had whirled, releasing his hold, anger swiftly replacing the hot, unnatural luster of his gray eyes as he beheld the range preacher, standing now ten feet away in front of the horses.

Gains laughed malevolently; abruptly he flung himself from the saddle, came to a halt facing the

Parson, feet wide apart, arms bent at his hips. "The Holy Man!" he grunted contemptuously. "The Parson—better known over at Loma Grande as a certain fugitive from justice that I've come from the sheriff's office to arrest!" He yanked open his calfskin vest, revealing a star on his flannel shirt. "Once your name was Granger Hume," he added in sharp, snapping tones—"Granger Hume the killer—the same Granger that turned yellow and skipped out to leave little Brazos go to jail for his crime when he killed old Dad Walker; and while Little Brazos rots in the penitentiary at Santa Fé, Granger Hume, the quitter, plays in the good graces of ladies, masquerading as a man of God!"

"That is a lie!" cried Joan Willoughby, through quivering lips. Her eyes went with gratitude to the Parson, flashed again to Gains, recoiled in fear at the defiant attitude of the deputy.

The Parson's lean jaw fell, at Gain's revelation that Little Brazos was in the penitentiary for a deed he had done; but only for an instant. His eyes clouded at thought of the insult to Joan and the menace still in the attitude of Gains.

"You're trying to play goody-goody to this range doll!" flung out the deputy, suddenly. "I was decent to her, hid my feelings, but now I want her. We'll fight for her—she likes 'em quick on the draw! Put up your gun, Granger Hume—stick it back in its holster, like mine is, and we'll be on even terms. I know you won't, because you're a coward and

yellow. But I'm asking it, to show you up in front of the lady!"

"No!" cried the girl, alarmed. "That would be unfair. He is out of practice——"

But the Parson had quickly sheathed his gun.

With a silent, smooth thrust he had done it, and his hand hung free, his body tensed imperceptibly, and his eye went to the hand and wrist of the gunman-deputy.

In the lacy light and shadow where the sunlight filtered through the trees to the trail, the preacher's gaze focused on the open, claw-like fingers of Gains. Out of the tail of his eye he caught a quick move on the part of Joan Willoughby, darting from the saddle, running toward him. In that fraction of time, the Parson's brain registered protest; he did not want Joan to interfere; he realized that the contest was unequal, due to his own failing, the weakness that had stayed his hand since he slew Dad Walker, the gun fever that made him quail at thought of shooting any man. But his whole being was crying out to face his peril boldly with absolute fair play, to strike with all his old-time, deadly skill, not for his own sake, but to protect the girl. Now he saw her plain purpose to intercede for him —and on the instant, without removing his riveted gaze from the deputy's claw-like fingers, he caught the flashing movement of Carl Gains' hand to his holster.

Two guns blazed, almost in unison, as Joan Wil-

loughby flung herself forward. Something glinted in the sunlight. Gains' gun had jumped from his hand, fallen. Its owner thrust out both arms, without a sound plunged forward on his face, and and lay still.

"I've broken my oath!" groaned the Parson, as the girl clung to him. "I can't shoot! I tried to hit the gun in his hand!"

The soft note of a dove in the bosque had succeeded the sound of the guns. But only for a moment.

CHAPTER XIX

A GHOST OF THE PAST

"LOOK!" The girl's word was a shriek. The Parson too had seen. A steeple-crowned sombrero, two pairs of lustrous dark eyes, a face of copper in the undergrowth, a six-shooter lifted high, ready to fall on man or girl.

Luis Escobar waited the part of a second to avoid hitting the young woman, as even the avid eyes of the cruel features revealed. In one motion the Parson leaped, tilted his gun barrel up, and fired.

A yelp of pain and a staggering man told that the bullet had reached its mark. The vaquero suddenly turned about, ran backward, toward his horse.

"Stop!" The preacher's smoking revolver raised again. Escobar stiffened, halted, and faced about slowly. He came toward his captor, one arm raised, his features working with a terrible expression of ferocity, jaw locked in stoical disregard of pain. The right arm hung limp, a red trickle over the oaken fingers.

Joan Willoughby, recoiling at the man's murderous gaze, shuddering at the still form of Gains in the trail, raised a hand toward the motionless deputy.

"Yes," said the Parson, grimly, "I see it now." He faced the Mexican assassin and his fingers pointed to the knife buried to the hilt in the deputy's back, between the shoulder blades. "You threw that!" he shot out.

Escobar's lips moved in sullen defiance. He lowered his left arm, touched his right forearm. "You-a shoot me *aqui,*" he snarled. "Eesn't that enough—*bastante!*" The torn sleeve of the discolored blue shirt revealed where the ball had gone.

"Where is your horse?"

The Jaramillo knife-thrower motioned toward the underbrush, back of where he had lain in ambush.

"Sit down, Escobar!" The Parson stepped to his saddle, unbuckled his rope, knotted the outlaw's legs hastily. Leaving Joan Willoughby to sound warning if the man should try escape, he hurried off through the chaparral a hundred yards until he found the vaquero's horse, which he led back. On the way, he halted at the point where the Mexican had crouched, lifted his gun from the ground. A glance at it told him that Luis Escobar had not fired from the weapon.

"Two shots, and Gains fired the other one—and it went wild!" His eyes flickered with meaning. "I hit my mark, dead center, after all!"

When he had brought the horse back to the trail,

he hastily examined Gains' gun, for verification. One chamber was discharged. But something else caught the Parson's eye, held his amazed attention. Lead was fused against one of the other protruding balls, merely a smattering of the bullet from his own weapon. The trigger of Gains' gun was wired back. "He had his hammer back when my bullet knocked the six from his hand," mused the Parson, "and that's how his gun shot right after mine, likely when it was sailing to the ground!"

The range preacher's shot had been perfect, and Gains would have been alive at this moment if the Mexican had not hurled the knife on the instant that the Parson had fired.

Apparently the knife was Luis Escobar's favorite weapon, and he had resorted to his pistol only after throwing the bladed missile.

Untying the outlaw's bonds, the Parson directed him to mount, offering assistance, which the vaquero spurned.

"We'll have to leave Gains here," he said, and asked the girl to mount and ride back with Escobar to the point where he had left his own horse, while he walked behind. "Go slow!" he directed the Mexican, and held his gun in hand. Within a few minutes the Parson had found his saddle, turned about beside Joan, and ordered the prisoner to ride ahead, off the bosque trail to the left, on a direct line over the range toward the Walking X.

There might be others of Badger Brogan's band

along the Cow creek line, and the Parson did not want to encounter them just now.

There was that in the eyes of the ranch mistress that thrilled the discharged foreman, as they rode twenty feet behind the outlaw; her gratitude to him, and unspoken admiration of his skill. Few words were spoken by man or girl, for the tragedy that had overtaken Carl Gains, a few minutes previously a live, virile man in his prime, silenced them both. Unworthy as the deputy had proved himself to be, neither of them would have meted out the terrible swift fate that Badger Brogan's lieutenant had dealt.

The hour was one-thirty when they had climbed the gradual, grama grass slopes from Cow creek and reached the flat range, stretching hot and dry under the high, blazing sun. Save for flitting towhee and desert sparrow, the range seemed deserted, with most of the Walking X cattle moved up toward Quemado Buttes. Presently a circling buzzard over a dead cow caused the Parson to shudder, thinking of Gains. The girl spoke, in subdued tones:

"You didn't break your oath, whatever it was, because it wasn't your gun that—killed him."

The other nodded gravely. "The bullet never even tore his flesh, as the facts will develop. But perhaps if I hadn't shot his gun away he might have defended himself."

"No. That knife came at the moment he fired on you, Parson John. I wonder why this man killed

Gains. I think he would have shot you next."

"Badger Brogan probably learned that Gains was an officer." The Parson fell silent, musing. One thought would not down, regardless of the somber nature of the bosque events. His gun fever had vanished.

In the extremity of this emergency, with the safety of Joan Willoughby at stake, he had been as cool, as swift, as certain of his target as he ever had been!

They reached the ranch twenty minutes later. The Parson would have turned Escobar over to Becker, as deputy sheriff, immediately, but on Joan's urging, the prisoner was locked up with Gringo Charley and a guard placed over the two.

"Becker is none too friendly to us," said the girl.

"But he is the only officer entitled to hold the prisoner."

"Wait until we see what he intends to do," she urged, her intuition guiding her in paths that the man would have trod blindly.

Hipkins watched the Parson with owlish eyes. "Inocencia'll shore murder 'em both now, when she feeds 'em," he declared. "If there's anything she hates, it's a Cholo that's a scamp."

News of the killing of Gains was withheld until Becker and Doctor Chaves, deputy coroner, could be notified. The women interested in the new Toro church, including Mrs. Loftus, were in the house

ready for the two o'clock meeting. They were not informed of the murder until a rider had been dispatched to bring the two officials. Joan and the Parson did not join them, but summoned Hipkins, Seres and Duffy Butler and rode toward the bosque. Tramer was instructed to bring Becker and Chaves direct to Cow creek from town. The two officials reached the scene a few minutes after the Walking X party.

The girl, at painful effort, recited how Gains had attempted to force his attentions on her, until the Parson arrived. She had gone riding with Gains, the foreman, to follow a clue that Walking X cattle, missing for a week, had been bunched across the fence line on Lazy H range. Her story of the slaying, and that of the discharged foreman, agreed. But Eli Becker was skeptical, and Doctor Chaves maintained a significant silence.

"It sounds very funny to me, alretty," declared the Swiss, rubbing his flabby hands, "dot any preacher shoult be able to shood like dot!"

"Believe as you like about that," retorted the girl, coldly. "It is plain to see how Gains met his death—from a knife. We've got the man who threw the knife, and intend to hold him prisoner until we feel sure he will be delivered to the Loma Grande jail."

Doctor Chaves made notes, released the body, promised to summon a jury later, an unusual proceeding. The two officials would take Gains to town.

They tied him across the saddle of an extra horse they had brought, hands and feet secured by rawhide saddle-strings, next to the heavy leather fenders. Figg, the undertaker, would look after taking the body overland to Loma Grande.

Becker, strangely enough, did not object to the Walking X holding Escobar prisoner. Such a course would let him out of a tight place if Badger Brogan should demand the prisoner. As for Gringo Charley, even Brogan did not know he was being held in the adobe jail.

Joan Willoughby, the Parson and the three Walking-X riders turned their mounts toward the ranch. Once the Parson fell back, with a gesture to Joan that he wanted to speak to her alone, but the punchers, intent on asking questions and marveling at the pistol work of the preacher, gave them no opportunity to talk alone without causing unseemly notice. They all rode together through the creosote bush flats, brackish-smelling and devoid of cattle, and reached the ranch at three o'clock. Escobar was still safe, under guard, notwithstanding the menace of Inocencia. Joan and the Parson went into the house to join the women, who were much upset over the latest murder.

They had been discussing that and their other troubles—the plans for the new church were endangered. Jes Mangel had begged off on his quota, not knowing whether he would be forced to sell, and Mrs. Loftus had broken the news that she and the

judge were leaving, having closed with Brogan; the the Neffs had already left. Dick Carroll's contribution rested with Joan and Miss Leffenwell, and they had lost heavily. The spirit was willing; they had tried to secure another hall, without success.

To them the Parson brought brief, but important word. "Do not worry about a hall. I am going to preach tomorrow."

He would give no further details, because he said he did not know them himself; but he urged them all to be in town in the morning.

After the meeting had disbanded, the Parson sought a word with Joan. She had gone into Dick Carroll's old office room.

"Now you know the truth, Miss Joan," he said, almost bitterly. "Gains was right—about my identity. I've failed as a parson; I've failed as foreman of the Walking X. I'm a fugitive; I don't reckon you'll ever forgive me for my deception. It is true that I killed Dad Walker, my dearest friend, a man who was like a father to me, and that's when I took an oath never to kill another man, and turned preacher."

She was silent, her brows deeply creased.

"Now you're without a strong gun hand, in the midst of a battle with a powerful, merciless gang of outlaws, murderers of your uncle. I'm going back, but before I go, Miss Joan, I want to say you've taught me again today, after six years, to use guns

like I used to do. I'd like one favor before I leave Toro."

"Leave!" she echoed. "Why are you going? What is the favor?" she asked, almost timidly.

He pulled from his hip pocket an ornamented, ivory-handled pistol, laid his hand upon it, gripped it with his fingers. "I found it in the bunch-grass after they carried Gains away. It's one of those I used to carry in the old days. That's all I am good for, I reckon. Gains got it where I threw it back of the adobe wall in Loma Grande; he likely was preparing to confront me with it. I've still got its holster, and its mate. Awhile back the sight of these ivory guns would sicken me. But there's need of them now, to save the Walking X—and you——"

"But your oath——"

"I reckon I'll have to be my own judge. I've failed in other things. I'm only a gunman. I said I'd arrest Brogan's men, and I want to hire out my guns, to you, before I go."

The fine lines of her brows contracted. "Go?" she asked slowly. "Go where?"

"Back to Loma Grande, to face the music."

"But I don't want you to go to Loma Grande—to meet Speck Ballentine."

The man gazed on her steadily. "I understand—what Gains said about Ballentine. Miss Joan, will you accept my offer?"

"No," she said quickly. "You must not! You have not been a failure—as a parson—as all the

range can attest. You were not a failure, as foreman. Gains made me discharge you, on threat to arrest you and take you to Speck Ballentine if I did not——!"

"You knew then? You knew I was Granger Hume!"

"He said it; I didn't believe it. But I don't want you to go back to what you used to be, and you have taken an oath not to go back. Gains is the only one who knew, and his tongue is stilled. There is no need for you to reveal your past. Ballentine—Ballentine and you are enemies. I do not want you to go to Loma Grande—for my sake? Please promise?"

He drew back from her. "For your sake?" he repeated, in a haze of doubt. A ghost of the past—Speck Ballentine—had risen between them; he saw it clearly now. A picture flashed through his mind, of this girl at the well under the dark umbrella trees at the Willoughby ranch six years before, on the night when Speck Ballentine and she had discussed the dreaded Granger Hume, during their love tryst. She did not want him to meet Speck Ballentine now—for her sake!

"Tell me you won't go back—for my sake, and for your own!" she beseeched him, earnestly. Her eyes did not meet his as he searched for them, but dropped to the worn grass rug of the floor. The man stood, wavering, struggling to hold back emotions that clamored for expression. She was asking

a great favor—to her—one more important even than the overthrow of Badger Brogan and the security of the Walking X.

"You wouldn't break your oath, would you?" she demanded, suddenly, wide-eyed, and now she faced him frankly.

The Parson's tongue stiffened, and the gray-blue eyes grew hard as agates. "No, Speck Ballentine's safe, ma'am," he answered coldly. "I won't go back, to what I was. Tomorrow morning I'll preach my farewell in Toro town, and I'm hoping you are on hand, Miss Joan." He walked with a quick step from the room.

He rode back to town, late in the afternoon, went to the bare, dusty "parsonage" in the rear of Don Alfredo's Painted Pony, removed a glove, and with a blunt lead pencil wrote lettered characters for some time on three squares of white cardboard. Presently he drew on the glove, lit his pipe, and strode out with the lettered notices held blank side out in his hand.

Eyes had seen him enter town, eyes both hostile and friendly, and some of these same eyes followed him as he tacked up the three squares of cardboard in three places. The Parson quickly returned to the Painted Pony, unlocked and unwired the old box-trunk in the corner, rolled up a bundle of his belongings, then went out the side door, facing the purple Ladrones.

Curious knots of cowpunchers, Toro townsmen, and henchmen of Badger Brogan gathered at the

postoffice, the little roofed bandstand in the plaza, and the O.K. corral, to read the square-lettered words:

SUNDAY PREACHING

The Parson of Toro will continue the interrupted Sunday morning sermons at eleven o'clock tomorrow (the fifteenth) at the plaza. Everybody invited to the open-air meeting. At this time the Parson will clear up the facts about the murder of Dick Carroll, Soapy Johnson and Carl Gains.

THE PARSON OF TORO.

When friends and some others sought him out for advance information, the range minister had completely dropped from sight.

CHAPTER XX

BROGAN HEARS THE NEWS

AMONG those whose watchful eyes had seen the Parson come, but not go, was Jerry Gore. He had stayed just long enough to read the lesser syllable words of the notices—Jerry's accomplishments were limited—then hurried toward the White Man's saloon, with the gist of the announcement in his head and one of the cardboard squares in his shirt.

That was the second time during this Saturday afternoon that the bandy-legged herald had trotted to his chief with important news. When, at four o'clock, Doctor Chaves and Eli Becker had ridden into Toro with the body of Carl Gains, over which a tarpaulin had been spread, they had attracted little attention until they had gone some distance down the long street. Although it was the tail-end of a big business day for the supply dealers who handled the demands of near and distant outfits, the presence of Badger Brogan and a number of his followers

had put a damper on the usual freedom of conduct and social raillery. It was as though the air was surcharged with impending events. And when the object on the middle horse attracted the inquiring attention of a passing rider, the grim news was spread silently, swiftly, with little show of outward excitement.

None the less an undemonstrative, curious dozen rangemen and Toro folk had followed Chaves and Becker and their tragic charge to the furniture establishment of Bertrand Figg, and to the back room that served as a mortuary. Among these was the omnipresent Jerry Gore, who waited only long enough to get a smattering of the facts, then hustled off to the White Man's saloon to his chief. That worthy had been standing at the bar when the first low words were communicated to the patrons of the place that Gains had been slain. Brogan had placidly held his place at the rail, showing none of the thrill of satisfaction that the news had conveyed. He was confident of further details from Jerry Gore and the puncher of the long hair. These two, with Brogan and three others, were, strangely enough, the only ones of the Lazy H outfit in town. A lot of work was being done by Brogan's hands, with the cattle of the Lazy H and the Neff ranch—work that, while it caused some grumbling on a Saturday afternoon, was very necessary to the Jaramillo chief's plans.

When Gore pushed his way in through the swing-

ing doors, his red-veined face flushed by the exertion of a hurried walk up the street, Brogan turned without delay and drew him toward the side alcove and in through the door that he had used on previous occasions.

"Luis got him—easy?" murmured Brogan, turning the catch in the rusty staple above the doorknob.

"Hell's a-poppin'!" shot out the pudgy gunman. "Luis got him, shore enough. But th' Parson an' that Walkin' X jane seen it, an' they got Luis a pris-ner, somewheres—jist when we need every hand with the herd! That's all I know, but Granger's over to Figg's now, and he'll be over soon's he gits th' lay."

Badger Brogan's mottled face drew into a drum-tight cloud. "Got Luis captured, have they?" he murmured, staring into space. "*Who* got him?"

"That's what I didn't find out, but——"

"Go over there," cut in the Jaramillo chief, "and bring Eli Becker here—pronto!"

Jerry Gore lifted the catch, swung out through the door in a hurry. Brogan's stocky frame settled into the chair behind the table; he quickly rolled and lit a cigarette, sat up alert, motionless, torso tense, hands rigid on the table; the same table over which the Parson of Toro had hurled him not so many days before. His mind worked swiftly, but he awaited further facts.

They were forthcoming, in less than five minutes.

The hooked-nosed, oily visaged Becker, ushered into the presence of the Jaramillo chief by Jerry Gore, gave all he knew willingly. "It vas not a shooting, Meester Brogan. It vas a stabbing. Ve do not say dot Luis Escobar do it—No! No! Dot remains to be broved, Meester Brogan. Gonfidentially, I do not think it is true. There iss a great disgrepancy——"

"Git down to tacks—what th' hell happened?" blurted out the listener.

"A great disgrepancy, vit the Parson shooding those guns from the fingers of two mens. I do not belief it!"

"W-what?" snapped the gunman. "Th' Parson shoots out their guns, eh! Since when'd that preacher git as good as that with pistols? An' whose guns did he shoot out?"

"Ve haf only vat the breacher and the girl said," the money-lender went on. "It seems dot, aggording to their story, Gains and the girl vare having some troubles; he was insolting her, and the Parson come along. Quick the Parson pulls a gun. Gains shoods, and the breacher shoods. Then comes a knife, and Gains vas stabbled in the back. There iss no bullet vound in him, Meester Brogan. Then, aggording to these vitnesses, Luis Escobar comes along, and the Parson shoods him in the arm—in the gun arm, Meester Brogan! Then the breacher, he holds Luis charged vit murdering!"

"Holdin' him," repeated Brogan, eyes drawing into pin-points of amber light. "Where?"

"Someveres at the Valking X. And dot iss all ve haf been able to find out, Meester Brogan!"

The gunman sat for a time in silence, the hard lines of his mottled face deepening. Suddenly he snapped away his cigarette butt, bent forward.

"This yere preacher-man's turned out to be a reg-lar gun-toter, all of a sudden. Now listen to me, Becker. That's the hombre that killed Gains—sabe?" The eyes of the rustler held a perfect meaning to Eli Becker.

"Maybe you are right," asserted the other, "but vat shall pe done about it? I am the only officer vit a deputy's gommission, and if I arrest the Parson, it vill be hard to make the peebles here belief dot he done it, he iss so bobular, Meester Brogan!"

"He is, eh? All right, Becker, yo'll find out danged soon that Badger Brogan's as pop'lar round yere as any folks in Toro town. But listen—I ain't ast you to jail that preacher!"

"Vat?"

"Badger Brogan's goin' to look after that, personal."

"So-ho!"

"Yus, Becker, an' I want you to write out a bundle of deputy commissions for my men, lackin' badges, to do this trick. I'm in a hurry to git back to the Lazy H now, an' won't have time to wait for 'em. You fill out some sheets of paper sayin' the

names I give you are duly made deputy possemen, under you—sabe? And have 'em ready at nine o'clock tomorrer mornin', and keep yore tongue hackamored. I'll be in to git them."

"But, I am only a deputy, and haf no authority——"

"Th' hell yuh say! Ain't I givin' yuh authority? Who you sidin' with, huh?" Brogan thrust out his warped jaw. "There ain't any representative of the sheriff this side the Ladrones but you, is they? It's yore job to ketch criminals, ain't it, an' organize a posse, if needed? An' we're volunteerin' to act, with yore authority, to ketch this murderer, dead or alive, ain't we?"

"Yes, yes! Of gourse you are!" Becker rubbed his hand nervously. "I will do vatever you think is right, to ketch the griminal——"

A voice at the door caused both men to turn suddenly. Brogan rose, turned the catch. "Come in, Granger. Wait—better bring Jerry along. Find him!" He turned to Becker.

"Be at yore office in the mornin', with them papers," he said, in low tones. "An' don't hand 'em to me before mornin'—and wait in yore office till I call for 'em, sabe?" He dismissed the moneylender with a gesture, and let the door remain open.

The smooth-faced, long-haired puncher who called himself Granger Hume entered with Jerry Gore. Brogan's expression suddenly changed; he grinned broadly as he faced the two.

"It ain't so bad!" he chuckled. "It won't interfere none, and will help, several ways. I'm goin' to git into Becker's office Sunday mornin', easy, an' him there with the combination of that safe! Now spill what yuh found out, Granger kid!"

"Whew!" The long-haired one pushed back his hat, wiped his perspiring forehead. "If what I make out is correct, that preachin' fool has turned out a gun-fighter, Badger! A gun-fighter! Plugged Gains' pistol from his fingers, an' done the same with Luis. And that ain't all! We ain't got as much time's we thought we had, Badger, to git them cattle bunched, pointed and trailin'. Speck Ballentine's on the way!"

Brogan's half-grin over the turn in events did not change. "How'd yuh know that?" he asked, easily.

"Keno Gruger jist rode into town, handed me word. Killed a pair of broncs gittin' here ahead uh Speck, ridin' day an' night. Speck won't git in till tomorrer night, but we ain't got enough hands to make our cut that quick."

"Ain't we?" Brogan laughed quietly. "Sence when'd you start playin' boss, Granger kid? Listen to me. I got them cuts we brought movin' faster'n you figgered, boy, an' no suspicions. Th' lay couldn't be perfecter. Lazy H is all bunched, and Double N was drove last night an' throwed into pasture. Zack an' the rest are workin' on Bar Double L right this minute, an' Walkin' X is bunched all our way, at Quemado Buttes, so's it

won't take more'n a day to finish. We go straight through tomorrer night, while Speck is in th' hay!"

"*Mañana!*" echoed Jerry Gore, amazed. "How about the money?"

"Didn't I say somethin' about seein' Becker in the mornin'? Where's yore ears? I ain't dead yet, Jerry. Becker's got that jack, an' we see him at nine o'clock, for deputyships!" He laughed hoarsely. "In his office, where he's got double what we paid over for Hazen's outfit on' the Neffs and then some. The judge ain't got his yet for what we're already movin', and he never will have." Brogan's lips twisted in a wry smile. "I don't miss any bets makin' my waddies work over Saturday afternoon an' night, neither!"

"You're a longhorn, Badger," agreed Jerry Gore. "Stealin' yore own cows, and all. But what do we do about Luis, an' Gringo Charley?"

"Gringo!" belched the Jaramillo chief. "Has that liquor lappin' lout turned up? Where is he?"

"Didn't that Walkin' X red-beard Minter, tell yuh Gringo's penned in the bunk house at the Walkin' X with Luis?"

"No—doggone his hide!"

"Somebody picked Gringo off'n the range the other night, instead uh him wandering off with a jag, Badger!"

Brogan brought down his fist. "It'll be easy. We go through Walkin' X, don't we, an' we kin pick up Luis an' Gringo, cain't we? As fer that

preacher, we got to git him fer luck, before we pasear!"

Jerry Gore pulled from his pocket a square of bent cardboard, held it up.

"What's that say?" demanded Brogan, whose ability to read English or any other language was as limited as Gore's.

"It says somethin' about preachin'. You read it, Granger."

The puncher of the unmatched eyes squinted at the lettering. "It says the Parson'll preach tomorrer mornin' in the plaza an' that he will explain —whew—explain the mystery of the murder of Carroll an' Johnson an' Gains!" He turned to the red-faced Jerry. "Don't it?"

Badger Brogan gripped the edge of the table, stared at his lieutenants. "Yo're lyin'!" he barked hoarsely. "Git a man that kin read straight!"

"Ask Artley—he's at the bar—he seen it. That preachin skunk tacked three uh them up less'n fifteen minutes ago, an' I copped this un from in front the postoffice."

Brogan's eyes glowed. "We got to shoot that bird tonight," he asserted, with an oath. "An' that'll keep us in town when we are to be crowdin' the drags uh the herd——"

"He ain't in town any more—disappeared sudden-like, after tackin' up them notices, an' even Alfredo can't find him," enlightened Jerry.

The Jaramillo chief rose and paced back and forth

in the little room for some minutes. Suddenly he squared about, and his black eyes gleamed satisfaction.

"In the mornin', at that church service, before he opens his mouth, there's shore goin' to be gun chatter!"

The long-haired one chuckled. "A ruckus is a holiday—for Granger Hume!" he sang out softly.

"*Bueno!* We see Becker early, and collect them down payments, with advance interest, two thousand gold an' more. All we paid for the Hazen cattle alone, an' we'll have Double N an' part of Bar Double L, an' all of Walkin' X. We'll pick up Luis an' Gringo, and go straight north on Sabbath day, for the Ladrones, with four good brands."

"But there's that talk goin' around about the Parson turnin' gunman, all of a sudden," commented Jerry. "What'll we do if he wears his artillery an' acts techy, at that sermonizin'?"

Badger Brogan studied the tip of his glowing cigarette. "If he does that, or if he don't, the three of us will pot him fer coyote bait on sight, becose we cain't take a chance on that hombre openin' his mouth. He knows more'n's good fer him!"

CHAPTER XXI

SPECK BALLENTINE

HAD the Parson of Toro, on issuing from the Painted Pony, been able to look with the eye of a falcon to the summit of Monte Largo, highest and longest of the peaks of the Ladrones, he would have seen two horsemen silhouetted against the red sky of sunset, gazing down on the distant Toro range.

For more than an hour the somber-eyed Speck Ballentine, acting sheriff of Loma Grande, and his boyish companion had been forcing their tired mounts up the steep pitch of the serrated pinnacles that lined the fire-tipped summit. Now, with startling abruptness, the two walls of the defile in which they had been traveling broke into a broad hogback of lava and granite. Behind them was dropping the ruby ball of the sun, as though racing to its bed behind the jagged horizon. The riders sat motionless in their saddles, facing the long streamers of purple

shadows to eastward, eyes for a moment drinking in the panorama before them.

"What a picture!" murmured the youthful Chick Gearing, turning his horse slowly. "I reckon that pinkish peak north is over sixty miles away. And those canyons!" he gestured below him to the huge gashes that fell away like a fan, "whole armies could hide out in those gulches, Speck. No wonder rustlers have holed in hereabouts, in these defiles, and no wonder, either, they call 'em the Ladrones. Robber mountains is right!"

The older man, slim and erect in the saddle, hands on the horn, gazed intently toward the southeast. He made a picturesque figure in himself, in range apparel worn by men of his office, seemed less than the thirty-five years he claimed, and save for his saturnine features he was good to look upon physically. The gorgeous, awesome grandeur of the Ladrones was not new to Speck Ballentine, and his eyes now were measuring the distance to the graying blue domain on the floor of the continent—the Toro range. Ballentine promptly made his decision.

"We won't try it tonight, Chick; it'd tucker us all out, man and horse. I've waited for this thing for six years, boy, and I want to go into Toro town fresh an' keen for my man!"

"Suits me," smiled the boyish deputy, shivering a bit in the chill of the mountain. "It'll be some place to camp, if it don't snow! Better go down a ways, by that scrub cedar an' oak, for firewood, eh?

But let's stay to see the view. 'Minds me of my ridin' days."

"View won't last long," muttered Ballentine, abstractedly. "Sun drops sudden on these summits."

As though in fulfillment of his words, the oversized disk melted as in a crucible, the sky burned slowly in fire-glow, the red turned to orange, then to turquoise, while the vistas east, north and south grew swiftly dusk. A lone coyote loped across the trail ahead. The riders cut down to a little flat beside twisted scrub timber and chaparral.

"You see that?" cried Gearing suddenly, turning in the saddle, "Renegade steers." He pointed toward a clump of dwarf cedar, behind which brownish objects were bolting. Both men seized their ropes, part of their equipment while trailing rustlers.

"Range cows!" Speck Ballentine spurted ahead, rounding the cedars. The boy came on behind. At a gesture from the older man, Chick took the opposite side of the trees. Ballentine's rope spun in the dusk, settled on the wide horns of a red cow, his mount stiffened suddenly, sank forelegs against the rocky ground. Gearing's rope zoomed as the cow flopped. In a moment Ballentine was beside the animal with the boy deputy. They took a look at the animal's hide.

"Jingoes!" shot out Gearing. "Joe Stack's Snaky S brand!" He stared at his companion,

jaw hanging. Ballentine released the animal, to scamper off down the mountain with its fellows.

"Yep!" said the sheriff, tersely. "Lucky we had ropes."

"An' I wonder how many more's up here runnin' in these canyons," speculated Gearing. "Reckon we better spend the night seein' what we can see. Might such a thing happen as we'd strike onto Badger Brogan's main stamping ground."

Speck Ballentine moved over to his horse, took the reins in hand and walked back to the cedars beside his companion. "Might do that later, on another trip, not *now,*" he said, meaningly. "Chick, I'll tell you somethin'." He threw down his saddle roll, uncinched the big latigos, setting the example for the other. Darkness had fallen with weird abruptness.

"I wouldn't turn off this trail now, if I knew Badger Brogan's whole gang was within a mile of here, ready for the taking," went on Ballentine. "After a man waits an' schemes for half a dozen years for a certain thing, he ain't goin' to be turned aside right when the big time comes, is he, boy?"

"Sure he ain't, if that's what yuh mean, Speck," assented the other with frank respect. "But if you take *him,* you'll take one, and here you might take a whole lot more——"

"It ain't what Jim Colcord and the whole of Loma Grande'd think," cut in Ballentine. "It's a matter of self-pride, I reckon. You saw me put

two hunks of lead through that magpie down the trail awhile ago, Chick?"

"See yuh! I never see a man use a pair of sixes like that, Speck, drillin' with two hands instanter an' puttin' both balls through the same birdie from the hip."

"Yo're young." The wailing bark of a coyote echoed through the mountain defiles. "Not boastin' any, Chick. But I been practisin' for six years to do that—couple times every week—sometimes every day—because I knew the hour'd come when it 'ud be Granger Hume or me—an' I wasn't hankerin' for it to be me!"

"There ain't a man livin' can face you with sixes, Speck."

"From the time that hombre—the only man that breathes—was able to take my gun off me, I said I'd never hold my chin up again till I mastered Granger Hume. I never could handle a pair of sixes, Chick, till then. Some say it don't matter—one's as good as two. I know better—saw too many. You got to club yore man to the ground with bullets, or he'll get you on the way, 'specially if he's a gun expert. Two guns accounted for Gregor and Fanner Webb. Well, all these years I been waitin', and when Granger committed that killin' of Joe Stack three weeks ago, I knew the time was near." He stooped to break out the dead wood from a scrub cedar, for fire.

"It's been a race, kinda, between Carl Gains and

me. Knew Carl was off on the wrong hoof goin' El Paso way. Granger never did like the big towns. And sure enough, along comes word that the long-haired gent is seen in Toro town, ridin' his gray, big as life." Ballentine unrolled bacon, pan and coffee pot.

"Carl Gains is lookin' for a name for himself," the acting sheriff resumed. "Wants to bring Granger in, and Badger Brogan too. He's a mite ambitious. Carl don't have the personal feelin' in the matter that I do. You see, son, in my young days—not so blamed long ago—I was a bit ringy myself, with my pistol—before I settled down under Sheriff Colcord. Granger and me was enemies. He hates me just the same as a scorpion, and I return the favor. He knows there's one man livin' that won't try to take him to jail, either!"

"Won't try to take him to jail?" repeated the younger man, slowly.

Speck Ballentine held his tongue. He had spoken more in the last five minutes, about personal things, than he had said in as many years. Perhaps the exhilaration of the end of the hunt was responsible. The pungent odor of the cedars came to them on the night air. Ballentine struck a match, touched it to the wood. He straightened.

"Yeah. When Speck Ballentine's eyes lights on Granger Hume, his gun speaks, instanter, because Granger's gun'll talk that very same way, the second he sees Speck Ballentine! There's only one thing'll

save Granger Hume, or Speck Ballentine—and that's if Granger ain't wearin' his hardware. And he just about sleeps with his two pistols on, son! Besides that little private matter, there's the Joe Stack murder that entitles me to shoot him down on sight—if I'm faster than he ever was, which I think I am!"

"I never saw a man draw quicker'n you, Speck."

"You never run across Granger Hume. But if I ain't quicker now, I never will be, and I can't hold my head up till I meet Granger Hume, gun for gun!" An owl's dismal voice drifted down from a dead juniper. The two men fell to preparing a hasty meal. A crunching sound reached them from the back trail.

Ballentine stiffened, and Gearing crouched. "Speck!" hissed the younger man. "You hear that?"

The other's hand was on his gun butt; he did not reply. Silence for a space of minutes. The near stars came out, blinked down to diffuse the blackness.

A horse stumbled on the rocky shelf above them.

"Who's there?" snapped Ballentine, rising like a phantom in the shadow of the cedars. Dimly, against the indigo sky of night, he saw the figure of the rider, not fifty feet away.

The man did not answer; instead, he wheeled his mount slowly to retreat. Ballentine's voice cracked on the still air.

"I got yuh covered, partner! Come down!"

The horse moved forward, toward the camp and the two faint outlines of the horses; the men were invisible. "I'm a Walkin' X waddie, ridin' through," said the voice. "Name's Tumbleweed Jones, naturalist and botanist."

"Slide down, till we look yuh over," commanded Ballentine. "We're from th' sheriff's office."

CHAPTER XXII

"LEANS FORWARD WHEN HE WALKS"

"OFFICERS? Man, that sounds better!" Tumbleweed flung down. "Golly!" He strode up to them. "I'm thankful, after what I've been seeing."

Clicking his spectacles case, adjusting glasses, he peered at the shadowy figure of Ballentine, noted the faintly glinting star on his vest. "Sheriff, you here looking for—them?" He lowered his tone. "Not two miles north, in a bowl back of Monte Largo, they've got a couple thousand head!"

Ballentine shuffled, tramped on the young deputy's toes. "How long you been up here, and what way you goin'?" he demanded of Tumbleweed.

"Been over on the Jaramillo, on business for the Walking X; goin' back to report to the Parson. If you gents are ridin' that way, we can swing in together, and you can ask the Parson."

"What Parson?" snapped the sheriff.

"Why, the Parson of Toro town—shore! Fore-

man of the Walking X, now, he is, since the girl took charge after the hangin'. If you gents want me to show you the bowl where those rustled cattle——"

"Hangin'!" cut in Ballentine. "What hangin'?"

"Why, the hangin' of Dick Carroll and Soapy Johnson, committed by Badger Brogan's bunch, that you two officers are goin' over to Toro to get——" He broke off short. "Yuh don't mean to say yuh don't know?"

"Come here!" Speck Ballentine took hold of Tumbleweed's arm, drew him against the rocky shelf beside the cedars. "Sit down now, an' tell us what's goin' on. Loma Grande's a mighty long ways from Toro town—might as well not be in the same county."

Tumbleweed Jones unfolded the story of events in Toro up to the time of his departure, picturing the arrival of Badger Brogan's men, a mere mention of which had dribbled into Loma Grande—their purchase of the Lazy H, the crime that synchronized with their arrival, without mentioning the secret of his own trip to get evidence connecting the Jaramillo band with the crime. When he related what followed the hanging, and mentioned the name of Joan Willoughby, Speck Ballentine shifted his position uneasily in the darkness.

"You say that girl came up from El Paso the day before her uncle was murdered?" he queried.

"Yeah, she came up with a young feller named Gains."

Ballentine struck a match, lit a cigarette, exchanged glances with Gearing. The young deputy's eyes were wide. "Carl is on a hot trail, after Badger, and it looks like he was stumblin' plumb into Granger Hume," commented Chick. Ballentine stepped roughly on his toes.

The sheriff's eyes narrowed in the glow of his cigarette. "You say this Gains arrived with the young lady?" he questioned. "How'd that happen?"

"Lordy, I dunno. Reckon Gains was coming up to see Dick Carroll, from the talk around there, and they just came up together."

"They seem friendly?" ventured the senior officer, staring into the black clump of cedars.

"Kinda—why?" asked the puzzled puncher. "You know either of them?"

"Gains is a friend of mine. Likely feller. I was just wonderin' if he made a ketch," returned the sheriff, in hollow tones.

"Far as that goes," grinned Tumbleweed, "I'd say the Parson was ace-high with Miss Joan, an' she's a high-class range lady if ever there was one, and I'm hopin' Parson John lands her!"

Speck Ballentine fell silent for a time, while Tumbleweed rambled on about encountering a rider below the summit of Monte Largo. "I'll wager a hoss they're Brogan's men in this neighborhood.

Took a shot at me, but I give 'em the dodge. That's why I was skeptical of makin' a sound when you halted me, sheriff."

"What kind of a hombre is this parson?" queried Ballentine.

"Young fella close to thirty, reg-lar features, always got a smile, well over medium height, leans forward when he walks."

"Leans forward when he walks," murmured Ballentine.

"Lightish eyes."

"Lightish eyes." The sheriff pulled deeply on his cigarette.

"Black hair."

"Long or short?"

"Short. Always seems to be wearin' gloves, even when he preaches."

"Always wears gloves!" repeated Ballentine, in higher-pitched tones. "How long's he been around Toro town?"

"I've known Parson John for five years, ever since he arrived. Never was a whiter man than the Parson. Folks 'most worship him."

"Was the preacher away from Toro, say, about three weeks ago?"

"Why, yes, he was, sheriff. Took a vacation, up here in the Ladrones, fishin', and thinkin' he might see something up here that would prove to Dick Carroll and Hazen that they wasn't stealing cattle from each other."

Speck Ballentine's features drew hard and tense; his somber eyes glistened in the darkness.

"You hear tell of a long-haired gent around Toro that answers to the name of Granger Hume?"

"Shore did! Granger's one of Badger Brogan's gunmen, and don't make any secret who he is!"

"What does *he* look like?"

"'Bout under thirty, even features, over medium height, eyes don't match, grins all the time, long black hair."

"Eyes don't match?" questioned Ballentine.

"Yessir, one gray and one brown."

The sheriff's long, serious face twitched in the darkness; he drew his coat around him as the autumnal chill settled on the mountain air.

"You ever see his wrists, if he's got a gun tattooed on either one or both?"

"I can't say I ever saw his wrists, sheriff."

"How's he walk?"

"Never saw him walk; he rides mostly; saw him standin' by the postoffice the day I left. Reckon he walks on his legs, though." Tumbleweed chuckled; it was not often he tried a joke.

"H-m-m! You think this Parson's shinin' up to the Willoughby girl, eh?"

Tumbleweed chuckled again. "There ain't a waddie on the Walking X that hasn't been slickin' up to ketch the eye of Miss Joan; and when she picked the Parson to be her foreman, said preacher, pop'lar as he was, near lost all his pop'larity round

that outfit. Yes, sir! The hands all say he's got her bridle-broke a'ready. I'd be plumb tickled to see it, even if I did have a notion in that wise my own self!"

Speck Ballentine rose suddenly. "While we're here, an' Mister Jones is willin' to act as guide, we'll have a look at that bowl a minute. Supper'll have to wait a spell!"

They mounted silently. Tumbleweed led the way back down the trail he had come up, a zigzag path among the rocks, and the one followed by the cows a half hour before. Progress was slow.

"Good mountain lion country, and hard on calves," muttered the Walking X puncher, halting at a spring.

"Bet these mountains are chuck full of wild game," commented Chick. They dismounted to drink.

"And rich as all get out in botanical specimens." Tumbleweed mounted again. Ballentine and Gearing lingered, examining the marks about the spring. "Lotsa cattle near here," murmured the deputy. They rejoined the guide, who proceeded more cautiously. After ten minutes Tumbleweed drew up.

"There's a shack over on that chaparral slope." He indicated a gray blotch in the starlight. "Right under us is the bowl where I see all the cows. You want to go down?"

"We'll take a look at that shanty."

They continued, single file, over the slope along the steep sides of the bowl. Ballentine had taken the lead. Presently he hissed a halt, slid from the saddle. The shack loomed ahead, four posts, wattled stick walls, roof of brush, showing no light within. "We'll take a look."

Two reports, in quick succession, echoed from the trail ahead, on opposite sides. With scarce an intermission two stabs of flame belched from Speck Ballentine. Tumbleweed was jabbing toward his holster when his horse toppled. Chick Gearing fired once, Speck Ballentine darted down the trail, broke into the chaparral.

Tumbleweed, on the ground, withheld fire, for fear of hitting the plucky officer. He abandoned his fallen, motionless horse, went to Gearing. They waited.

Speck Ballentine came striding back. "They won't confess, they cain't!" he said grimly. "Mister Jones, you hurt?"

"Only my bronc."

"You'll be able to ride in the mornin'. On a rustler's horse." They moved their mounts up to the cabin, risked a fire to cook supper, and to test out the presence of others, while Ballentine lurked in the shadows, ready. There were none.

While Tumbleweed went for water, Speck Ballentine spoke to the boy. "Too bad you didn't get your chance. They was down before you drawed. You'll learn. But to tell the truth, I never was goin'

to allow you to get in sight of Granger. That's my chore. I wanted a legal witness. Tomorrow is Sunday, and we ride into Toro, separate. I dislike to do it, in a way, shoot a preacher on sight—and on Sunday, too, but——"

"Shoot a preacher!" gasped Gearing.

"S-h-h! Don't shout it, son. The hombre that's paradin' openly as Granger Hume is a fake. Th' real Granger's the Parson of Toro town, up to his old tricks. I'm goin' to see him *mañana,* after six years' wait."

"Listen, Speck, are you plumb sure?"

"Shore as a forty-five. Joan Willoughby's preacher friend has got to shoot the fastest in his history tomorrow—on sight."

"But if he ain't got a gun, Speck?"

"He'll have two," asserted the sheriff, positively. "If he ain't wearin' 'em first time I spot him, he'll hustle to strap 'em on pronto. Mark my words. When the killer-preacher gets wind of my arrival, he'll get two forty-fives. How'd I know? I'm sendin' him word, ahead; this Walking X puncher'll take it. And then I'll shoot him—kill him—like he killed others, includin' Joe Stack!"

CHAPTER XXIII

LONNIE HAZEN HEARS A LOT

PARSON JOHN, unknown to Joan Willoughby, returned to the Walking X Saturday night, after posting the notices of his sermon. He rode past the ranch house shortly after dark, and went directly to the Quemado Buttes camp, where Bill Minter, under Gains, had been rounding up the last of the Walking X herd. He did not wholly mistrust Minter, but had believed for some days that the fellow, top-hand of the outfit since the passing of Soapy Johnson, should be watched. There was no doubt of Minter's ability as a cowman, he knew every head of stock on the range, but other veterans of the Walking X, like Hipkins, mistrusted him, and he had been bitter over the elevation of the Parson and later Gains. Furthermore, what the Parson had seen that morning near the Cow creek line had made him apprehensive.

If Badger Brogan planned a wholesale raid, the Quemado Buttes situation might play into his hands,

whether Minter were guilty of treachery or not, the Parson knew.

True enough, the preacher was no longer in authority at the Walking X; also, he believed Joan was nothing to him, or rather, the other way around, due to her long engagement to marry Speck Ballentine, now a respected peace officer of Loma Grande. It was well that it was so, he reflected, poignant as was the realization, for it was but a matter of days until he was to go back to Loma Grande, not as a foe to settle the old feud with Ballentine, but as a fugitive confessing his identity, offering no resistance. Little Brazos must not serve an unnecessary day in jail for a crime he did not commit.

But there was a job to be done before the Parson went back. He had made a promise to arrest Brogan, when the time came; he had not forgotten it, and Joan must not suffer further from the depredations of this band of slayers and cattle thieves. He was thankful that this Saturday's events had restored his confidence in his old-time skill with guns; the dreaded fever was gone, he believed, forever. If the trail of Granger Hume was leading at last to the penitentiary, he would pause long enough to take the Jaramillo chief and his guilty confederates with him. If he should fail, he would have nothing to lose, anyway; his usefulness on the range as an apostle of law and peace was at an end. But he believed he would not fail.

Hence he had gone to Quemado Buttes to make

sure that the rumored mysterious movements of cattle were not jeopardizing the Walking X; he had ridden quietly past the Carroll home base just after dark and proceeded to the bunching ground to have a frank talk with Minter. He had found the surly cowman with only three hands to guard the three thousand head in the wide draw between the twin sentinel buttes that rose gray and ghost-like from the range.

The Parson was taken aback, at this obvious carelessness, or worse. "You don't mean to say you're trusting this herd to only four men, including yourself?" he asked, pointedly.

Their eyes clashed. "You notice anything specially dangerous about it?" countered Minter, sullenly. "I've rode circle with that many men; I've drove t'ree thousand heads seventeen miles in a day with only one hand crowdin', me pointin', ridin' in and out behind the leaders. I'm a cowman. What's a preachin' flunky know?"

The Parson's jaw clicked. "Only this: Brogan's got more'n a dozen hands working on this same north range, across the creek, not five miles off, and if he took the notion, he could clean you of every head."

Minter frowned, beneath his three-weeks' growth of red beard. "Couldy? I'd like to see him try it. As for you, Parson, you ain't formanizin' any more!" He turned away toward the big tarpaulin

that had been reared as a walless tent on five long piñon poles.

The range minister jogged off in the darkness, went quietly to the Walking X bunk house without awakening Joan. He intended to sleep there for the night; also to learn if Minter's act was occasioning any comment. It was eleven o'clock; snores came from some of the bunks; three punchers were at a table under an oil lamp, flipping cards.

"Has Miss Joan named a foreman yet?" asked the Parson.

"There ain't no foreman, lessen it's Minter," frowned Tramer, one cheek knobbed with a sizeable chunk of plug. "Reckon Miss Joan is boss herself; an' she's plumb loco havin' us all stay yere guardin' these two polecat pris'ners. Only guardin' we do is watch Inocencia; she started knifin' Luis t'day. Herd up there's without guns, an' talk's big that Badger's liable to strike again, savvy?"

Minter's act was causing comment, then, reflected the Parson. He remarked that Brogan might try to release the prisoners first, and perhaps Joan was right, after all, in keeping most of the men at the bunk house.

"Shucks," grunted Duffy Butler, blue-eyed "big boy" of the outfit. "I'm guessin' somethin'. Minter talked her into this arrangement!" He eyed his two companions uncertainly, then explained.

"Us bein kept here to guard two pris'ners and sacrifice the whole herd while doin' it!

Who'd stake these two Jaramillo skunks," nodding toward the boarded-up room, "against three thousand white-faces, anyway? Let 'em take the pris-ners, that's what I'd do, before I'd risk the cattle." His eyes roved. "Somethin' else! Minter's been seen talkin' to that long-haired Granger Hume, down in Toro. Looks suckspicious to us-all, eh?"

He looked at his companions, who nodded meaningly. "I'm goin' to have a talk with Miss Joan in the mornin'—danged if I ain't—and tell her what I think, before she makes that hombre foreman. But say, Parson! What's all this about yore goin' to preach out th' names of Dick Carroll's killers tomorrer? And you all of a sudden turn out a shootin' wolf, too. Doggone— this goin' to be a gun-in-the-pulpit party?"

The Parson grinned. "Maybe you boys'll be willing to trot in to hear a sermon once, if I hold my tongue until then, eh?"

"Shore will—every buckaroo. But listen, preacher—yo're takin' a chance, don't yuh see yuh are! Badger ain't goin' to set around clappin' his hands while you designate his name, for murder, is he? And anyway, it don't do no good to name 'em—ever'body knows. You'll only start a ruckus, an' they'll have ten pieces of artillery to yore one. It'd be plumb unwise, and I'm tellin' yuh!"

There was more advice, and the Parson crawled into one of the straw tick bunks in the midst of it,

pulled the blankets up about his neck. Oblivious to the humdrum voices that succeeded occasional caprices of the cards, he lay thinking. He fell asleep heedless of a late arrival who had spent the evening in Toro and whose sole topic as he flung off boots and chaps was the sermon that the Parson was to preach on the morrow.

In the chill of Sunday morning he was up before daylight; went to the cook house before breakfast and started a fire, helped himself to some of Inocencia's cake batter and spuds, which he found in a pail of cold water, already peeled. These he cooked hastily, with coffee, topped off with Inocencia's special Sunday morning wild honey. Before sunrise he was off, avoiding further questions by late-sleeping punchers, and without seeing Joan Willoughby.

He cut off toward the Cow creek boundary, the long way to town, in the gray dawn, drank in the cool aroma of the range, now fresh and vibrant with the flash of white-winged dove, the song of lark, the throaty note of Gambel quail. He rode east as the sky flamed red with the advent of the sun, skirted the green palo verde, the amole and cactus and the plebeian lacy mesquite, ribboned with shadows on the plain. The world was beautiful, almost too beautiful for a man to leave voluntarily for the gray desolation of prison walls. But the Parson had made his decision, his one thought of

Little Brazos, who had suffered all these years in duress because of Granger Hume's crime.

Presently his pony dipped into a barranca jutting from the creek south of the bosque. Here his eye caught a stretch of broken fence. He drew up, examined the laid-back wire and posts. They had been placed thus by human hands. It puzzled him, for no Walking X cattle remained that far south. But the dust told of other bovines that had gone through, and the Parson knew that a herd from either the Bar Double L or the Neff outfit had been driven through here during the night, onto Lazy H range.

He rose to the rim of the barranca and scanned the open range to the east, beyond the Brogan line. Now there was visible a haze of brownish white, clouded with yellow dust; it was moving northward in the flaming shafts of the early sun.

Daybreak Sunday morning—an unusual time for a trail herd to be in motion! The Parson marveled as the sight unfolded, and murmured words of speculation.

"If Badger Brogan hadn't brought out Hazen and the Neffs, I'd say he was going to drive plumb ahead to Monte Largo!" He watched the dust cloud. "In a hurry, and sure runnin' meat off those critters! Wonder if his men'll be too busy to come to town for the sermon this morning. Bet they'll pasture before then!"

After watching for some time, he left the Cow creek trail and rode sharply to the left, to intercept

the wagon road to Toro. One other significant development caused him to speculate as he rode; he had not seen a single cow for miles along the boundary, even on the Lazy H side.

Thinking of this and the trail herd some minutes later he did not see the rider who emerged over a low-grade rise in front, from the direction of town. The horseman broke into a gallop at sight of him, and the Parson looked up. As he drew nearer Lonnie Hazen's facial features were revealed. In a minute the former Lazy H owner was beside him.

"Mornin', Parson!" he shot out. "I was lookin' for you, all over town, calculated you might be at Walkin' X, started out to see yuh!" His eyes held a feverish glitter. "You treated me white, Parson—never even asked a question about that hangin', though you knowed Dick Carroll and me was gunnin' for each other the day before. Now I want to pitch in my gun with yuh. I'm in trouble—made a mighty mistake, brung a nest of snakes here when I sold to Badger Brogan. Sold!" He broke off, and cursed inaudibly.

"Sold! I've been tricked. He's runnin' off my herd—for a paltry thousand! But, doggone me—that ain't the chief thing I wanted to see you about, Parson. He's goin' to kill yuh this mornin' if yuh try to preach that sermon!"

The range minister's lips parted in a wan smile. "Sounds interestin'," he drawled. "How'd you know?"

"Jake Leach! They're goin' to hole in at the White Man's House this mornin'—some of them upstairs, a bunch in the saloon, right across the plaza, where they c'n stop yuh before yuh start! Brogan knows all about yore gun work with Gains and Escobar; he's hopin' and prayin' you wear your pistols this mornin', but no matter what, his gang are goin' to shoot yuh down!"

"Jake told you this, Lonnie?" queried the Parson casually.

"Jake's soured, lost business ever since they come, and all they do's run up bills. Brogan's gettin' ready to dig, Parson, goin' to light out today! With all my stock, an' the Double N, an' he's got half his men drivin' herd right this minute, intendin' to make a raid on the Walkin' X too, to free Gringo Charley and Escobar—an' take the Walkin' X cattle along. All fixed with Minter!"

"With Minter!" snapped the Parson. "How'd you know that?"

"Yeah, he's got Minter fixed to turn over the Carroll stock without a shot at Quemado Buttes, if the waddies'll let him, and if they don't Brogan's killers will shoot 'em down, that's all. And me! He'll clean me, three thousand dollars' worth of beef for a thousand, an' my mortgage won't be worth the paper it's written on; I'll have the ground and the buildin's, without a calf! The same with Gus and Louie Neff, and Judge Loftus is scared stiff because Brogan bunched his herd with Lazy H durin'

the night. Jes Mangel's gone to whisky, fearin' he'll lose some too. An' where'll that girl owner of the Walkin' X come out? I tell yuh, I brought in a bunch uh snakes, when I sold to them mangy, skunk-tailed, hydrophoby kioty tarantalers. An' there ain't nothin', looks like, c'n stop 'em now——"

"Looks bad," admitted the Parson, grimly. "What'ud you suggest?"

"We're hamstrung, if Brogan puts all his guns to work. There'd be two-three against twenty; Loftus is sick; Neffs have left, Mangel's drunk. We'd jest about have you an' me an' Hipkins, not countin' Nick Parsons' two blacksmith fists." Hazen smiled weakly. "Yore preachin' the last few years has mighty nigh taken all the gun scrap out of the Toro range, Parson."

"Looks that way," returned the Parson, meditatively.

"I didn't come to get yuh to intercede for me," added Hazen. "Wanted to warn you they'd assassinate yuh. They're talkin' now that you murdered Gains; scheme to have Becker an' the long-haired fake Granger Hume try to arrest yuh, and they'd shoot yuh down if you have guns on, claimin' resistance——"

"You said something about *fake* Granger Hume," broke in the Parson, eyeing Lonnie Hazen intently.

"I know. I'm the only one that does know, Parson, you're Granger. Haven't mentioned it to a

soul since the day Carl Gains first hit Toro—Carl was an old friend of my family—and told me who you were, walkin' in front of Leach's place that day."

The Parson held silence; his mind darted back to the day of the sand storm on the street when the words had come to him in the wind. At last those words stood explained.

"And knowin' you are Granger, I'm anxious to pitch in my gun with you, if yuh go for Badger Brogan—but don't let him slaughter you in a trap—durin' a sermon! My idee would be to send for the sheriff an' a big posse. It'd be too late to save the cattle, but we might trail 'em and recover later."

The Parson rested one hip in the saddle. "Lonnie, I'm much obliged—more'n I can express. But for your safety's sake, and mine, I'll want to ride into Toro alone this morning. Won't want your gun, Lonnie, thanks again. You ride ahead. If anybody asks you, tell 'em the Parson delivers his little talk on schedule this mornin' at eleven o'clock." He crooked his left arm upward, toward the Ladrones. "Looks like another storm was brewin'; skies gettin' gray, all of a sudden."

"But it'll be plain murder! With them assassins at the hotel windows, an' Badger baitin' yuh——"

"*Adiós,* Lonnie, and much obliged again!" The Parson cut off sharply to the right, leaving the road, in order to enter Toro town in his own way.

He reached the rear of the Painted Pony building

at an early hour that Sunday morning unobserved; drawing his horse between buildings, he unlocked the door of the "parsonage" and entered.

He sat at the little warped roll-topped desk and spent some time oiling two ivory-handled frontier-model Colt forty-fives, one of which he had taken from the dusty box trunk. Later he buckled on belt and double holsters and tucked in the guns with their curving stocks at reverse angles to one another.

CHAPTER XXIV

SCARED STIFF

TRUE to the prediction of Lonnie Hazen, a band of riders from the Lazy H rode into Toro before nine o'clock Sunday morning. They were twelve in number, more than half of the Badger Brogan outfit, and among them, besides the king of the Jaramillo, were Jerry Gore, Zack Greevey, Legs Gournard, a Frenchman who was better known as a horse-thief than a rustler,—Artley, an ex-convict, and the pseudo Granger Hume. The streets of Toro, even at that hour, were beginning to hum with activity, with the arrival of cowpunchers from all the nearby ranches, the Walking X, the Fiddleback, the Bar Double L, the Double N and others. Veterans of the range and younger fellows were keen to hear what the Parson would have to say. Owners, including Hazen and Jes Mangel, were early arrivals, and there were wranglers, buckaroos, cooks, flunkies, stage drivers, freighters, horse-walkers, in addition to townsfolk. A sprinkling of

women was already in evidence; cow horses were beginning to tax the hitch racks; buggies, buckboards, box spring wagons drifted up the wide street to the plaza, and Lee Jon did a rushing breakfast business. There had never been a church service like it.

Until the appearance of Brogan's cavalcade the sole topic had been the sermon; bets were placed on whether the Parson would accuse the range terrorists by name. After the arrival of the jingling, clinking horde, talk became more guarded. Word traveled quietly and swiftly that Badger Brogan was going to make good his threat that the Parson should not preach.

Hip Hipkins hustled into the Painted Pony, the doors of which Don Alfredo had thrown open, but not for business. He was looking for the Parson, to sound a word of warning.

"Yes, he's here, in his room," the Spaniard answered Hipkins' question, "but his door's locked and he isn't seeing anyone."

"But I got to see'm! Jist had a talk with Jake Leach; I got information he's got to know, and Miz Joan!"

"Bust in the door then; he won't open it. I tried. If it's to warn him that Brogan'll shoot him, he knows it all now," asserted Don Alfredo. "Lonnie Hazen has told him everything."

"And what are we-all goin' to do—set down an'

let them snakes shoot him, like they hung Dick Carroll?"

"I don't think they will," returned the mild-mannered Don Alfredo. "But there's no use stirring up a ruckus, and Pars' John doesn't want any. You notice, Hip, that there isn't hardly a pistol in sight out there among all those cow hands?"

"Shore I noticed it! Scared stiff, that's what they are," grumbled the veteran puncher. "A bunch of sapsuckers! You notice I'm wearin' mine, Alfredo!" He proffered his flask; helped himself.

"And the Parson doesn't want you to!" returned the Spaniard. "The last thing he'd tolerate would be a gun fight here on the street when he holds church, and you know that, Hipkins."

"Dunno. Since he's took to pistols hisself, like he done with Gains an' Escobar, he might welcome it if some uh his friends was in that congregation armed."

"No, he won't want it!" insisted Alfredo. "If his friends came toting guns, it would give Badger Brogan just the chance he's looking for. Can't you see that? You'd be wise if you'd laid up your hardware. Brogan doesn't dast shoot an unarmed man, and if the Parson's *amigos* go with pistols, they'll endanger him that much more. Don't you see?"

Hipkins frowned, admitted he had never thought of that.

"If you want to protect Pars' John, better unbuckle your artillery right now!" concluded Alfredo.

The horse-breaker, after scratching his head in ponderous thought, did that very thing.

Badger Brogan and his men had dismounted in front of the White Man's saloon, opposite the plaza. The chief went into the hotel door and saw Jake Leach, asked him to open up the main entrance, which was the saloon.

"But we do not sell liquor on Sunday," said Leach, narrowly.

"We'll drink it for nothin', then, Jake!" grinned Brogan, significantly. "There ain't anybody here to arrest yuh for violatin' the law, but I'll fix her easy. We'll jest go in an' *serve ourselves;* that lets you out! An' we'll take only a single drink. You kin keep the doors open. You got them two front rooms reserved for us, Jake?"

"Them rooms is closed," said the hotel man, quietly.

"Closed! Ain't I reserved——?"

"They're closed, in the interest of peace, Brogan. I've set aside two rear rooms for you."

The Jaramillo chief stared, unbelieving. He read in the steely gaze of Jake Leach a hostility that he had not counted upon when he picked Jake Leach's saloon as a rendezvous in Toro. Jake was not the kind to be bribed by patronage.

"All right," hummed the rustler, folding his lip back over sharp teeth. "We'll straighten that matter out in half a hour. I reckon yo're scared you'd be liable, for conspiracy, if yuh let us have them

front rooms. That it?" He laughed unpleasantly. "We'll see!"

Brogan went out, talked earnestly a moment with Jerry Gore and the long-haired gunman. After a few minutes' appraisal of the hotel, the chief and Jerry Gore swung on their heels and crossed the street to the office of Eli Becker. The one called Granger Hume, piloting the remainder of the band, entered the White Man's House, via the hall-like lobby, pushed back Jake Leach, and sauntered into the barroom. There was that about the attitude of the long-haired one, wearing two big jogging guns, and these thirsty, swaggering renegades, that Jake Leach did not seek to block their passage. Brogan might be reasoned with; these men were reckless trouble-seekers without even a plan of action.

They helped themselves to a number of drinks, but did not open the swinging doors, for which Jake was thankful. He did not hear Granger's comment, in low tones, to the one called Zack; "We'll swing 'em open in plenty of time for the sermon, boys. An' Badger'll git them two front rooms, don't you worry none! Then it's us for the Ladrones and the big cut, *amigos!*"

In the office of Eli Becker, Badger Brogan and Jerry Gore strode over to the bald-headed figure bent at the desk, nervously drumming with his fingers; Becker looked up quickly. In Gore's hand was a coil of rope, and the money-lender eyed it uneasily.

"You are alvays on time!" he chuckled, with affected cordiality. In business, it was his code always to say something flattering. "I haf been here writing oud the debutyships, Meester Brogan!"

The Jaramillo chief had halted, and his eye had swept to the safe. He noted with satisfaction that it was locked—proof enough that it held what he had counted upon. With startling ease and grace Badger Brogan produced his six-shooter, held it lightly in his fingers.

"Pull down the blind, Jerry!" he sang out softly. While the money-lender's eyes went wide in amazement and fear, Gore yanked down the shade.

"Never mind them commissions, Becker. Open yore safe!" The gunman's drawl held a menace that froze the spine of the Swiss.

"Vh-y, v-at—?" stammered the frightened man.

"Open it, pronto, before I drill yuh!" growled Brogan, impatiently. He leaned forward, thrusting the gun muzzle nearer to the other's head.

"I send the money ofer to the pank at El Paso," protested Becker, through lips that had turned ashen.

"Did yuh?" sneered the robber. "Open up, an' we'll have a look. Quick!" He jabbed the six-shooter forward.

Becker rose suddenly, hands shaking; his twitching fingers fumbled at the dial; his eyes darted at intervals toward the Jaramillo pair. His fingers moved awkwardly, icily, as though to delay the act in hope of some interruption.

"I'll count ten, an' if yuh don't swing her open by then, I'll fill yuh with lead," snapped the gunman. "One, two, three, four——"

Becker swung open the door.

"Now tie him up, Jerry," grunted Brogan, stepping to the safe. The florid robber acted quickly, using the rawhide rope. Becker started to struggle, until he saw Gore's upraised fist, then suddenly submitted. With his victim's hands and feet tied securely, the bandy-legged outlaw crumpled a red handkerchief into a ball. Heedless of Becker's pleas not to be gagged, Gore rammed the ball into his mouth, tied it into place.

Badger Brogan had turned the key of the inner compartment, emptied out gold coin, a little silver and a roll of large-denomination bills, chuckling at the extent of the haul. He did not count the money —it wasn't necessary.

"Now yore office is closed fer over Sunday," he enlightened, grunting at the bound and gagged man. "If yo're a good hombre, somebody'll come and git you tomorrer when yore office don't open as usual. If yuh raise a ruckus—" He made a gesture toward his holster that was eloquent.

Brogan and Jerry Gore tucked coin in their pockets, bills under their belts, and tramped from the office in business-like attitude, into the street, after turning the lock so it snapped as they closed the door.

"That'll sweeten th' pot," murmured the chief.

" It's more'n we paid over for the Lazy H and the Double N—by considerable! An' Becker'll skin them ranches outa every cent of it—he's that kind. Tough skinnin', at that, after we tote off them cows. A good week's work, since we hit this Toro range." He looked up toward the plaza. " Now let's go see about that preachin' service!"

CHAPTER XXV

GRANGER HUME RETURNS

BROGAN and Jerry Gore strode up the street the short distance to the plaza, paused a moment to stare at the crowd that had begun to line up near the little pavilion where the cowboy band played Saturday nights, then crossed toward the White Man's House.

"He's goin' to have a crowd; women among 'em," grunted Jerry, shrugging.

At that moment a girl rider drew up to the hitch rail in front of the Painted Pony. Gore crooked a finger in her direction.

"You ever see that jane?" he asked, softly.

"Who's she?" demanded Brogan, halting in front of the hotel door, gazing toward the graceful, dark-eyed young woman who stepped lightly from the stirrups, paused a moment to caress her ebony pony's muzzle.

"Bet she's the new Walkin' X she-boss. 'Tain't

every day they come that way, Badger. Dang me, lookit the way she lifts them heels—now!"

Badger Brogan feasted his eyes on the trim, supple figure, his flat head thrust slightly forward, frame motionless as a statue. Smouldering fires long dormant glowed in his jet eyes. As he watched her move toward the edge of the broad sidewalk, his Adam's apple rose and fell. "Purty lady!" he murmured huskily. "An' she's the one that's sweet on that preachin' galoot—makin' him foreman, an' all!"

"You said it, Badger. How'd yuh like to slip yore bridle on her?" The outlaw chief did not answer that, but his features tightened, reddened. "Yuh kin do it, easy, Badger, if yuh play yore cards!"

"How?" whispered Brogan.

"We go through Walkin' X this evening, don't we? And she'll be there, when we take Gringo an' Luis, won't she? Well?"

"Ma-ma!" Brogan jerked himself up straight, turned as the girl vanished in the crowd. "We got a play to make first, Jerry. We'll see what we see!" He led the way through the hotel door, oblivious to the many eyes that had been watching the two Jaramillo men. In the short hall they stopped.

"You and me stays in the saloon, by the door," he shot out in a quick whisper. "Zack an' Artley goes to them upstairs winders. Granger goes over

the minute the preacher shows his face." He lowered his sibilant tone.

"Now, we let Granger start the argyment, like I said. If the minister's got a gun, we pot him, pronto. But if he ain't, we cain't shoot right off, becose this crowd might be techy. Then we pull the arrest, fer murder. Legs Gournard is posted in that crowd now, an' when he howls for a lynchin', Zack an' Artley shoots to pertect the pris'ner. And you know who they hit! But I'm hopin' he has a gun."

"He'll come heeled," asserted Gore, confidently.

They went into the dark cool lobby where Jake Leach was leaning at his desk uneasily watching the scene in the saloon. The Jaramillo band were still indulging their thirst. Suddenly, as Brogan was sighted in the other room, the long-haired gunman swung open the saloon doors and braced them with chunks of crystal quartz on the floor for that purpose.

"Now, Jake," grunted Brogan, puffing quickly at a newly-rolled cigarette, "show us them front rooms." He tapped the butt of his protruding Colt.

"Yo'll have to take 'em, Badger. My hands are clean," snapped the proprietor.

"Git Artley an' Zack," said the other, quietly. Gore hastened into the saloon, came out with the two gunmen. "You kin show 'em up, Jerry."

They stamped up the open staircase, and were gone for some minutes. After a time Jerry Gore

came down, exchanged a significant glance with his chief, and hurried into the saloon.

"Come in the bar, Jake, where we kin see yuh," droned Brogan, motioning to the door in front. Jake Leach went. The rustler trailed him in, and his followers checked their low monotone when the king of the Jaramillo appeared among them.

"Pour one more drink," he drawled to the Lazy H minion in front of a big mirror. Brogan turned his back to the grooved polished fixture, and his eyes flitted out through the sunlight of the broad entrance, to the plaza where the silent crowd was waiting for they knew not what.

Jerry Gore moved over beside his chief. The long-haired cowboy of the unmatched eyes sidled toward the doorway, adjusting his heavy cartridge belt as he went. As he stopped, he bent slightly, fingers to the inside of his hips smoothing the two rawhide thongs that held down his holsters. He stood in the shadow, eyes on Brogan, smiling crookedly, awaiting a sign.

"She's ten minutes to eleven," mused Jerry, "and Granger's got yore orders, Badger."

Taking a swift slug of liquor, the outlaw leader turned, continuing his gaze with keen, unwinking eyes toward the plaza pavilion and the throng under the yellowish mulberry trees.

At that moment in the small public square Lonnie Hazen had located Joan Willoughby among the several hundred persons present. He spoke in low

and earnest tones, told what Jake Leach had revealed about the saloon ambush.

"I couldn't influence him to stay away," said Hazen, in a whisper. "I thought mayhap you could, if you c'n find him before he arrives. Whatever he does, make him leave his gun behind!"

"Where is he?" exclaimed the girl, alarm in her dark eyes.

"Dunno, Miss. I was jest down to Don Alfredo's, and he's left his room there, an' nobody knows when."

Joan Willoughby gasped hasty thanks, wound her way through the crowd toward the street. Reaching the edge of the throng, she hesitated, scanned the thoroughfare in both directions. There was no sign of the Parson. Her eyes went to the open doors of the White Man's saloon, and the dim figures loitering in front of the bar. She glanced at the two windows above; no one was in sight, but she knew from what Hazen had said that gunmen were posted there.

Without hesitation she walked briskly across the street, up the plank sidewalk, and in through the broad entrance to the barroom. Just within the threshold she paused, eyes staring, her face taut with all the loathing and hatred of men who had committed cowardly murder and were planning more.

"Badger Brogan!" she hissed. "Is he here?"

The Jaramillo chief, for a moment surprised,

stood in rigid uncertainty. Suddenly his jet eyes lightened, with the flame of her allurement. He tossed away his cigarette, bowed with an awkward sweep, and removed his big hat.

"Me? I'm him," he grinned. "What kin I do fer th' purty lady?" He moved toward her a step, but halted at her tone.

"I came to tell you that you are a band of assassins and cowards, and we know your purpose! If you shoot the Parson here this morning, I'll not rest till the last one of you goes to the gallows, and I'll lead the rangemen for a hundred miles to take you, you cow thief!"

Badger Brogan stiffened, wet his lips, rubbed his moist palms on his leather chaps. He did not answer, at once. Instead, he motioned significantly to the vaquero guarding the entrance at the left. "Show the lady out," he muttered, forcing an unnatural smile. "The saloon is not a nice place fer a critter so beautiful!"

A shadow broke in the doorway. A slightly swaying, slightly leaning figure sauntered into the ray of the sunbeam that lay aslant of the floor.

In the center of the wide threshold he stopped, eyes sweeping the interior. At sight of the lurking long-haired object to the right of the open door he seemed to bend almost imperceptibly. His eyes widened in focus, as though resting on Badger Brogan, Jerry Gore, the long-haired one, and every man in the room.

At his hips hung two scuffed holsters, tied down with rawhide strings to brown calf boots with stars in them. Ornate gun butts peeped from their sheaths. A deerskin cape, heavily fringed, hung on the stranger's shoulders.

"Well," drawled Badger Brogan, easily. "Who the hell are *you,* and what do yuh want?"

"Name's Granger Hume," came the answering drawl. "I understand a certain gent has been paradin' round here claimin' he's me. I'm hankerin' to listen to the music of his sixes!"

CHAPTER XXVI

THROUGH THE POWDER SMOKE

UTTER silence, save for the low drone of voices in the plaza, succeeded the words of the two-gunned figure near the entrance of the barroom. Outside, the news traveled with weird swiftness that something was going on in the White Man's saloon, and already an opening had formed in the dusty street toward the plaza, where the lean, slightly bending outline of the challenger was in view. There were eyes that had followed the mistress of the Walking X into the saloon; amazed members of the crowd had drawn into the street when Granger Hume had appeared with such uncanny suddenness and entered the room.

As though they realized the portent of trouble, the spectators outside had remained at respectful distance. As the ominous situation within the room became plain, the arc widened, for if Badger Brogan's men opened fire on this quietly belligerent

gun-fighter, there would be peril to those in the street. The word went from lip to lip that the stranger in buckskins, high-peaked sombrero and starred boots was none other than the Parson of Toro town—for several had caught a plain view of his features as he passed.

In the brief interval that followed the words of the man with the double guns, Joan Willoughby, standing not ten feet to the left and in front of him, read clearly the story of his identity. She held herself in tense expectancy, beat back the impulse to run to him and shield him from men whom she knew would not hesitate to shoot him down, by fair means or foul. Something in his manner told her that he was master of the situation, and that any move of interference on her part would mean greater peril to him than if she stood aside. She saw that Badger Brogan and Jerry Gore did not draw their guns, and that the long-haired impostor near the door held himself rigid, eyes not on the Parson, but on the Jaramillo chieftain, as though awaiting some word or gesture that should guide his conduct.

Badger Brogan's one elbow remained resting on the bar; the thumb of his right hand hung in his vest pocket, ready to drop down. His narrowing eyes had only in a general way taken note of the fringed cape, the beaver hat, the polka dot neckerchief about the collar of the blue flannel shirt, the gray whipcord trousers tucked into star-edged boots—apparel that had come from the dusty box trunk in the

Painted Pony. Something else held the gaze of the Jaramillo chief—the straight-cut, aquiline features of the stranger's face.

The challenger's hands were gunless now, hanging easily out from each hip, in an attitude of apparent careless indifference. So far as the guns were concerned, this intruder was on an even footing with the long-haired gunman at his left. But Badger Brogan did not signal for attack. A slight doubt still clouded his expressionless countenance.

For more than a year, even since Brogan had picked up the two-gun expert whom for his own reasons he had dubbed Granger Hume, Badger had been apprehensive that the real Granger might some day appear. At first glance, on the entry of the stranger, Brogan had stamped him as the real Granger Hume—until he had studied his face. As his gaze continued to verify what was growing in his brain, the outlaw's lip twitched in a faint smile, and his tense fingers grew more at ease.

Ever since the arrival of the long-haired expert, Badger Brogan had followed an oft-rehearsed practice in dealing with those who were rash enough to contest his power, be they one or many. He knew he had but to shrug now and turn his back, when the guns of his own Granger Hume would speak. And then, when the weapons of his henchmen were blazing, Badger could swing with the agility of a cat, his own six-shooter up and belching to the rhythm of his hammer-fanning left wing. Jerry

Gore also would not be idle. On other occasions there had been the knife of Luis Escobar. With the long-haired one taking the initiative, it was always safer for Badger and Jerry Gore.

But a matter of seconds had passed since the bantering words of the Parson. Badger Brogan's gaze settled on the level, widely-focussed eyes that seemed to see from right to left and in front all at the same time. If this was the Parson of Toro, his whole attitude was that of the finished gun-fighter, and for the fraction of a second the Jaramillo chief wavered again in indecision.

He played safe. "If yo're Granger Hume, Badger Brogan ain't got no bone to pick with yuh, hombre!" he said huskily.

His eyes darted to the long-haired puncher by the door. That individual faced the newcomer to his own advantage, from an angle. Badger Brogan's eyes glinted with satisfied cunning. A slight whisper, so faint that even Brogan had to strain to be sure, fell on his ears from behind, and above him. The outlaw's pupils shifted; out of the tail of his left eye he caught the hazy outlines of two crouched figures on the stairs that led from the hotel rooms to the bar below. Those figures were not within the range of vision of the newcomer near the entrance; but they could command the latter's middle. Badger Brogan knew that Zack Greevey and Artley, forewarned from the window by the actions of the crowd, had come to the landing where they could be

of use. The outlaw's jaw twisted, eased up from its hard-set pose.

It would be easy now—even if this Parson could be the dreaded Granger Hume! Brogan heard the drawling rejoinder of the man before him. "Yo'll have a bone to pick in a minute, Brogan. I'd advise yuh not to go gun loco till yuh hear why I'm here!" The Parson had assumed the lingo of his hectic days.

The Jaramillo chief suddenly grinned, and a throaty chuckle rose from him. The tone of the voice gave him verification, even if the glare of the sunlight behind the gun-fighter did not make the features unmistakable. He uttered the thought that was uppermost. "Granger Hume, huh! If yo're Granger, I'm the Parson of Toro town!"

A grim smile flickered at the other's lips. "Mayhap I'm that said Parson—and mayhap I'm his twin brother, come to Toro town with my guns to see that you hombres don't start a ruckus when he preaches his sermon this mornin' in the plaza!"

Brogan hunched his left elbow higher on the bar. "That twin brother play might git over, Parson, if twins had the same voice. When you an' me held that little pow-wow back in that side room, where you slammed me over th' table, I heard yuh talk, Parson, an' I seen yore map. Yuh certainly stuck yore haid into a badger's hole when yuh come trottin' in here with pistols——"

"Listen," hummed the other, with a meaningful

note of warning. "Granger Hume sabies yore game, Brogan—with them gun hands at the windows and with this little layout here waitin' for the Parson to start preachin'. Yo're plannin' to murder him, Brogan—if he comes with guns or not. If yuh think I'm that same Parson, here's yore chance. The minister preaches this mornin', tellin' how he knows you hanged Dick Carroll and Soapy Johnson. I've come a little ahead of the sermon, Brogan, and in order to protect the preacherman, I'll have to ask all you gents to stick up yore paws—pronto!"

"Pronto!" he repeated, as every eye stared.

Badger Brogan shrugged, turned his back, the move for which keen eyes had been waiting.

He did not see the flicking guns that darted from the Parson's sides, swift as the motion of light. His ears cracked with the double concussion of heavy forty-fives that broke like one; he heard the scream of Joan Willoughby, and as he whirled stabbing for his own weapon the air vibrated with drumming explosions. Brogan's eyes caught the driven form of squat Jerry Gore as it struck against the bar, and a stumbling object on the stairs. His fingers clutched, seized the pistol butt in his holster, stiffened, as though paralyzed. It was not the stooped, groaning long-haired puncher that smote him with terror now, nor the wicked single-actions that the Parson of Toro town held alive, close to his double holsters, muzzles toward the stairs and the bar where

stood Badger Brogan and his other followers. Staring through the powder smoke at the thing that drove a sudden chill through his blood, Badger Brogan touched his weapon without leveling it; his claw-like fingers twitched, opened, and his heavy bluish-black Colt thudded to the floor of the barroom —an act designed to save the outlaw chieftain's life.

"Granger Hume an' no mistake!" he gasped, mouth wrenching, lifting his arms high. Like one transfixed he continued to stare at the pictures of purple guns on the wrists of Granger Hume, revealed at last by the forward slant of the Parson's two forearms facing the peril ahead. For once, the preacher was not wearing gloves.

Through the brain of the rustler raced the question? What had happened to Zack and Artley? He perceived now that the scream of the girl held the answer. Zack Greevey was hunched cursing on the stairs; Artley was coming down, facing the terrible guns of Granger Hume, after the leaping girl had masked the Parson from the hazard in that quarter. Jerry Gore was crouched against the bar where he had been driven by the forty-five ball that had sedged his shoulder. The pseudo Granger Hume paled with mutilated fingers, and the pistol he held in the other hand a second before, was dead —hammered from his stinging fingers.

"Put down yore hands, Brogan!" snapped Granger Hume suddenly, "and collect the shootin' irons of those other waddies," gesturing to the

sullen Lazy H men whose aptitude with the long loop was more valuable to the rustler chief than their guns had proved in an emergency like this. "Pile every pistol on the bar," added the Parson, as Brogan lowered his arms with a scowl, "and the quicker you do it, the quicker these hombres will be bandaged up and I can get to that sermon! It's eleven o'clock now. That's the system—lay 'em up there. Jake'll take care of 'em and put 'em in the safe. And don't try a false move, because I've got my two sixes jest where I want 'em, rustler-man!"

While the Jaramillo chief lifted the six-shooters from the holsters of his much-relieved followers and took up the three weapons from the floor, the Parson addressed Jake Leach, standing by the hotel door. "How'd you like it to make this barroom a jail, an' lock it up tight, to hold the murderers of Dick Carroll and Soapy Johnson, under guard, until we can get 'em over to Loma Grande? You'll do double business afterwards, Jake!"

"I'd hanker to do that little thing, Parson," grinned the owner of the White Man's House.

"They'll get what medical attention they need from Doc Chaves—for my namesake's fingers, Zack's toes and Gore's shoulder right at the arm," said the Parson. "I was lucky; didn't hurt 'em more'n necessary." A voice reached the Parson's ears.

"Hip an' I'll act as guards—there's plenty others,

too, Parson." Lonnie Hazen strode over beside him.

"Good! Now I've got to talk to the folks out there like I said I would!" The range minister turned toward the quiet, glowing eyed girl, who was at the side door leading to the hotel lobby. He stepped that way, to thank her for the warning about the gunmen on the stairs. He did not speak at once, but led the way into the lobby—by going thus he aimed to avoid the crowd already surging at the main entrance. "Miss Joan, you saved me, in there," he began. He cut off short as a male voice from among the crowd on the sidewalk came to his ears distinctly:

"Speck Ballentine's on the way, to take Granger Hume," it said. "Tumbleweed jist come in from the Ladrones with the news!"

CHAPTER XXVII

AN HONORABLE MAN

THE Parson's neck muscles raised, at the words, but his facial features remained tranquil. He turned his even, level gaze on Joan Willoughby, who also had heard. He spoke earnestly, ignoring the reference to his old-time foe.

"You saved my life, Miss Joan; I don't know how I can ever repay you."

"And you saved me, and the Walking X," she returned quickly, a worried frown between her thin, dark brows. "Now what are you going to do? You heard—that——?"

"I'm going to preach the sermon, givin' the proof I have about Brogan's men, and confessing I am Granger Hume and a fugitive from justice, ready to give myself up." His jaw tightened.

Joan Willoughby in the half-light of the passage way drew near to him, so close that his cheeks flushed at her very nearness. They were alone, so near to the crowd, yet seemingly very far from all that had just happened. "Don't!" she pleaded.

"Please do not confess now, with Ballentine coming! Oh, can't you see, it will do no good! You have been a Godsend to the community; have changed your own mode of life. You will only go to prison, or worse——"

"You wouldn't have me hide, while Little Brazos rots in jail for a crime I committed?" he demanded, eyes hardening. "You wouldn't respect me if I tried it, and besides, Brogan and the rest already know who I am."

"I was thinking—thinking you might go away for a time, until after Ballentine comes and goes—or perhaps folks might believe you had a twin brother. Oh, I see how futile it all is!" She reeled slightly. The Parson seized her.

His pulse raced, his heart beat wildly. "Joan, Miss Joan!" he moaned. "I can't stand to keep silent any more—unfair as it is for a fugitive to say it to you. I have loved you from the first, love you now so it tortures me not to utter it. I'm not asking anything—expect nothing in return. You've made me see my duty plainer than I ever knew it before, Miss Joan, and I can't hide out any longer—even from Speck Ballentine——"

"No, no! You must not meet Ballentine—whatever happens!" Her eyes held the same wild fright that the Parson had seen there on that other occasion when he had recoiled from her, as one pleading for the Loma Grande officer. Now again he stiffened, drew back from her, at the tormenting suspicion

that Ballentine's safety was her uppermost thought. And why shouldn't it be thus, between her and the man she was pledged to marry? The Parson drew himself together.

"Not to use my guns on him," he said, slowly, "but to surrender—" The words were cut short.

"Hey, Pars' John—lookin' for you!" The voice was that of Tumbleweed Jones who had entered the saloon where he had been told the Parson had gone. The puncher-botanist came at his long stride. "Got the proof, Parson! Found the tell-tale Aristida arizonica poverty grass on the Jaramillo—the same that was stickin' to that rope, and that species of the Agrostideae don't grow within a hundred and fifty miles of the Toro range, but over on the Jaramillo there's aplenty, besides the whole needle grass family, havardii, longiseta, vaseyi, micrantha, schie——"

"Thanks for that, Tumble," said the Parson, warmly, wringing the puncher's hand. "That's the missing link in the chain of evidence these folks'll need."

"Yeah, boa! And comin' back I ran into Speck Ballentine, the sheriff. Asked a lot of questions about yuh, Parson. He's comin' to Toro," in lower voice, "lookin' for this long-haired gent, Granger Hume!"

"Coming to Toro?" probed the Parson, a flicker in his light eyes.

"Yeah, will be here in a couple hours, I reckon.

Told me to ride ahead with a note to be delivered to you in person." Tumbleweed drew out a folded bit of paper. "Here it is!"

While Joan Willoughby and Tumbleweed Jones stood silently waiting, the Parson unfolded the note, and read:

"To the self-styled Parson of Toro

"No need to beat it, Killer Granger Hume, when you read this, because if you do, I'll trail you if it takes a lifetime. I'm sending this so if you happen to be delivering a sermon, you can have your guns on. Have them on, Granger, because this time we meet even, with two guns apiece. I've waited for six years to square the account, Granger, and I'm honest enough to admit I don't figure on taking you back alive. I'm going to shoot on sight. So I reckon you better see me first.

SPECK BALLENTINE."

"What does he say?" exclaimed Joan, suddenly, noting the swift stiffening of the Parson's face muscles.

"Did you read it, Tumble?" the preacher asked.

"Of course I didn't," asserted the puncher, reproachfully.

"Excuse me, for asking. I can't tell you what it says now, Tumble, but I'll tell you later. I'll see you after a bit." As the long-legged messenger departed through the hall toward the saloon, the

Parson turning to Joan, handed over the note in silence.

She read hurriedly. As she finished the paper shook in her fingers. "And now you'll have to face him," she said in tones grown weak and lifeless. "In spite of everything, all you've preached, all you've practiced!"

"Why?"

"You can't go away now, after that," she answered listlessly, "after he's challenged you. You can't even refuse to wear your guns, without being branded—a coward."

They moved through the deserted hotel lobby, reached the outer door beyond which the street was surging. "I'm going to preach that sermon now," said the man, in quiet tones. "Sometimes it takes more courage to refuse to fight a duel than to go into battle. That's what I've preached all these years." He pushed his way out through the crowd, toward the bandstand, before she could say more. Wondering, she followed in the path he broke among the motley congregation and took her place directly under him when he mounted the small platform.

The heat of the morning had broken, due to a darkly overcast sky that came after intermittent sun and cloud, giving relief to the hundreds who squeezed from all sides toward the plaza pulpit as word traveled that the Parson was ready.

In the garb of the gunman of the double holsters, the range minister began to speak, without pre-

liminary, without text, without prayer, as was his custom in talking man to man before his range audiences of the Painted Pony. Slowly and in low tones at first, he reviewed his own entry into Toro town, told how he had come there because of its bad name, its feuds, killings and contempt for law, natural to a place so far from other communities. He revealed his identity and his past, recounted what experience had prompted him to lay aside his guns and to become a simple range hand and a parson. His voice broke as he pictured the shooting of old Dad Walker, the man who had trained him in the use of guns. That experience had opened his eyes to the curse of pistol-toting; made him see that other men as good as Dad Walker were dying of the bullet route through misunderstandings as trivial. He told of honest, honorable men who had slain each other without enmity, each fearing the stigma of cowardice. Others the Parson had made see their mistake in time.

Finally he pictured the arrival of Badger Brogan and his outlaws into Toro, and reviewed the hanging of Dick Carroll and Soapy Johnson. He told of the signs at Pine Shadow Spring, the absence of Brogan, Gore and Escobar from the White Man's House on the night of the tragedy. The tampered letter and its contents were revealed, together with the evidence obtained by Tumbleweed Jones. He related just how Carl Gains had died.

"I put on my guns again, not for myself, but

for others, to save peaceful, honest people from rustlers and murderers," he said simply. "If I didn't practice what I preached, it was because there was no legally constituted officer here to protect life and property, and I assumed that rôle. It was without authority, and I will answer for that, alone."

He denounced the gunman breed. "The best pistol fighter is the worst—the greater his skill, the greater the itch to show it. Guns put the mean, the inferior, the cowardly, on a par with brave men. Look over the gunman breed—monsters most of them. No honest, kindly man can match the cruel, heartless bully in killing, for he with scruples will hesitate and is lost. Cowards hide behind guns. There have been exceptions, but the Dad Walkers are in the minority."

Then the range preacher read the letter from Speck Ballentine, amid tense silence, while ears and eyes strained for every word and gesture.

"In the code of the old Granger Hume I once was, I'd be a coward to refuse this challenge," he said earnestly. "But I reject it. You have heard me say many times it was as courageous to face the charge of cowardice as to face the fire of deadly six-guns—often more so. Speck Ballentine was my enemy. He is not my enemy now. He is an officer, sworn to uphold the law. He is an honorable man. If I fought him, I would be doing what I've preached against all these years. I refuse to shoot it out with him, I take off my guns, and surrender."

He unbuckled his belt, loosening the leather band with its cartridges and holsters and their contents, dropped them to the floor of the little platform.

"Rats! You kin shoot him to pieces!" came a voice from the crowd. "After what yuh done to Badger Brogan, Granger, yo're not goin' to let no Loma Grande hombre come over yere an' run Toro town!"

Waving aside the interruption, the Parson concluded his sermon along lines often heard from his lips in Toro before: quoted briefly from Scripture, emphasized the need for genuine brotherly love and neighborliness among all the range elements, pleaded for an impartial trial of the men accused of murder, and left the plaza in absolute silence.

Tumbleweed Jones picked up the fallen guns; nearby punchers made a rush for them, for souvenirs. A woman's voice pleaded insistently for them, and Tumbleweed promised she should have them at the Walking X.

The Parson felt that at last he had lost his popularity in Toro town, but he did not care.

CHAPTER XXVIII

CACHED GUNS

BILL MINTER let his pewter knife and fork rattle noisily when he dropped them on his graniteware plate under the open tarpaulin tent at Quemado Buttes and gazed with intent sharp eyes toward the trail that wound around the southern butte in the direction of the Walking X buildings.

"Whozat?" demanded the ferret-eyed Zig Tinley, limping over beside him and gesturing toward the rider who, even at that distance, could be seen spurring his horse to the utmost.

"Dunno." Minter shrugged his beefy shoulders, turned cautiously and looked toward the third guardian of the cow camp, Duffy Butler, who had been shifted here because he was so innocent looking. Minter leaned forward, lowering his voice almost to a whisper. "'Bout time. You look after Duffy if he starts a ruckus," nodding toward the "big boy" of the Walking X, "which ain't likely. Me and you, Zig, puts up a play of defendin' the camp, but

Badger savvies. You git yours. Keep an eye on Duffy, that the fool don't start shootin'." He turned again and gazed uneasily toward the approaching rider.

" Don't like it with that lone hombre comin' here first, instead of a gang. He might start talkin' an' spill somethin' that Duffy'll hear. "

Zig Tinley nodded abstractedly, squinting in the direction of the rider, who drew near swiftly, crossed the mesquite draw at a spent lope, his horse blown, flecked with white lather. The stranger flung himself from the saddle before Bill Minter who pressed a blunt, dirty forefinger against his lips in warning to the newcomer, as Duffy Butler strode over. Minter barked a sharp command:

" Ride over to the south butte, pronto, Duffy, an' see if there's any excitement at the ranch—pris'ners might make a break! "

The blue-eyed youngster stared wondering, saw the positive gesture of the boss and mounted, while the strange rider continued to hold his tongue. As Duffy rode away Minter grinned.

" You Bill Minter, ain't yuh? " queried the newcomer. " Glad to know yuh. I'm Legs Gournard of the Lazy H. Hell's a-ridin', now. Badger an' the boys was in Leach's place all set to clean that preacher an' start through here, when in trots that same minister an' sticks up the whole party, and they're in jail now, under guard in Jake Leach's saloon——"

"Holy—blazes!" Minter was on his feet. Zig Tinley clutched lean fingers about his gun butt. "Yuh mean to say that preachin' Parson juzgadoed Badger Brogan?" His hoarse voice rose to a yell. "Yo're plumb loco, stranger!"

"Am I?" Legs Gournard laughed huskily. "Wisht I was!" He drew his mount toward the spring beside the tent. "Why'd I be stringin' yuh? I was the on'y one that Parson didn't corral in that saloon, account of bein' hoss-guard, outside. An' I come hell fer leather to let yuh know th' lay. That Parson——"

"A parson!" ejaculated Minter, throatily. "A common, low-down she-parson puts Badger Brogan an' his gun hands in the hoosgow!"

"Lissen to me!" snapped the Frenchman. "You know who that said Parson uh Toro is? He's not a preacher, not any! He's a fake, as a minister! He's Granger Hume, that's who that Parson uh Toro is!"

Bill Minter stared dumbly, mouth twitching in nervous unbelief. Suddenly he laughed, hollowly, unnaturally. "Th' Parson—the same preacher that's allus talkin' Sunday school palaver—him a killer, Granger Hume! Ha-! Ha-r! Ha-w!"

"Laugh—damn yuh!" grunted Gournard, turning sideways. "I come to talk sense. Badger's a pris'ner, so's Jerry Gore, so's Zack an' Artley, so's Diego an' a bunch more. Pris'ners in the White Man's saloon, with men guardin' them! Now what

I come to say——" He cast a quick, suspicious glance toward the lame puncher.

"Zig's all right," put in Minter, thickly.

"Good. You an' me an' him's got a job to do. But first, who's yore foreman?"

"Me," grinned Minter. "The girl jist as much as put me in charge t'day!"

"Couldn' be better! Yo're boss. Scatter them hands at the Walkin' X that's lookin' after Gringo an' Luis. Then we git Luis an' Gringo out, and with me an' you an' yore lame friend here—that's five—we ride to the Lazy H an' pick up the other six that's lookin' after the herd. We all ride into Toro town an' shoot up them guards easy, and Badger and the boys are free!"

"Badger an' the boys are free!" echoed Minter.

"Then if there ain't goin' to be fireworks on this here Toro range my name ain't Legs Gournard!"

"U-m-m!" Bill Minter scratched his head, a doubt arising. "You shore we kin——"

"Shore as eleven sixes! That's what we'll number, agin two-three that knows their pistols."

"But this here Parson—Granger Hume?"

Gournard chuckled. "Granger's through. Laid down his guns for good. Biggest grandstandin' stunt I ever seen, an' I was in that crowd standin' right under him when he dropped his hardware——"

"Parson's cached his guns, has he?" queried Minter, suspiciously.

"Yeah!" The other laughed. "Nary a doubt. Confessed he was a wanted man, Granger Hume, accused of killin' a man or two, and laid down his weapons in surrender before Speck Ballentine arrives to take him."

Minter's close-set eyes opened wide. "Speck comin'?" he asked quickly.

"Due today—an' that's why we got to shake a shank before we have that extry gun to fight. What yuh say?"

Minter fingered his thick red chin whiskers, debating whether to back out. No, the rewards at stake were big, and this plan of rescue looked plausible. Besides, there was danger of a "leak" as to his connection with the plot anyway.

"Count me in," said Minter, thickly. "What's our first move?"

"Right off. When that big boy comes back, tell him to guard camp here. Yo're boss. We ride down to Walkin' X. You put up a story about the herd bein' in danger of Brogan's other hands. Order 'em all here to the Buttes. Then we free Gringo an' Luis—and start. How's that?"

"Elegint," dubiously. "Eh, Zig?"

Tinley nodded, and they awaited the return of Duffy Butler. Suddenly the Jaramillo man emitted a low growl of warning.

"Hosses back of them junipers!" He jerked his head toward a motte of trees north of the Buttes, in the direction of the Ladrones. In a moment two

riders issued from behind the motte onto the open range. They halted for a spell, then turned their mounts directly toward the cow camp at a brisk gait.

"Them Badger's men?" queried Minter, as they drew nearer.

Gournard squinted intently to make sure they were not Brogan's men from the Monte Largo stronghold. "Nada," he said finally. Abruptly he whistled as the tallest of the riders slowed to a jog, revealing his long saturnine countenance. "Speck Ballentine!"

Minter ripped out an oath. "What's he hornin' in here for?"

The Lazy H man laughed. "Yo're nervous. He won't see nothin here to arrest us for! Treat him perlite. Can't beat him into Toro, but mayhap we kin use him!"

"Use him?"

"Uh huh! He's comin' to arrest Granger Hume, an' while folks are watchin' that interestin' show, we kin be chattin' with Badger an' Jerry in the saloon, if we step lively! Keep mum now till this gent talks." They fell silent.

Sand funnels spiraling here and there from the range presaged a stormy afternoon, which might help the undercover movements of the remaining Lazy H band. The two riders drew rein before the tent.

"Hyah?" grunted Ballentine, dismounting, surveying the close-in cattle, the Walking X brand of

the horses, and the unmarked bronco on which Gournard had ridden. "Walkin' X?" His companion swung down, led the two horses to the spring.

"Yeah," replied Minter, civilly, while the other two nodded. "Yo're Mister Ballentine?"

"Where'll I find your foreman?"

"I'm him."

The sheriff's cold, granite eyes contracted. "You're not the gent they call the Parson?" he queried, easily.

"Nada. Parson's no longer foreman, sheriff—not since he killed Carl Gains. I'm——"

"Killed—Carl—Gains?" repeated Ballentine, slowly, between lips that drew into a straight, thin line.

"Yeah," lied Minter. This had been a sudden inspiration. "I reckon you know all about who the Parson is, sheriff?"

"Do I?" asked the officer, enigmatically.

"Shore you do!" blurted Gournard. "The Parson read out yore letter in public, the one yuh sent by Tumbleweed Jones—read it out in his sermon this mornin' in the plaza. I reckon he done it to show folks you was threatenin' him!"

"Right after usin' his guns on Badger Brogan's hombres!" put in Minter.

Ballentine stood for a moment unmoving, eyes narrowing in slow amazement. "Explain that! I'll be obliged, Mr.——"

"Minter. The new foreman." He proceeded to

explain, giving the events of the morning an interpretation designed to center the officer's attention doubly on the Parson. When it came to the details of the sermon, he let Gournard tell the story.

"Foxy," volunteered Minter. "Granger Hume's as full of tricks as a dogie is ticks. Makin' a play of surrender, takin' off his guns. You never hear of Granger's pet jockey—cached guns?"

"Watch him," put in Gournard. "Knowin' yo're on the way and mean business, he reads that note puttin' you in the light of a would-be killer, so's he kin pot yuh in self-defense. He won't be taken alive. He'll have guns on again, and he'll try to see yuh first, sheriff, the minute you hit the town!"

"Shore. Take it from Bill Minter!"

Speck Ballentine abruptly changed the subject. "You reckon yore boss, Miss Willoughby, will be at the Walkin' X house now?" he queried.

"Seen her ridin' to the ranch not half an hour ago," asserted Gournard. "Right after the sermon, after talkin' to that killer. He rode with her a ways, then turned back to town."

"Thanks." Ballentine turned to his horse. The two officers mounted and pushed on into a lope south.

Duffy Butler came at an angle from the lower butte, proceeded back to camp; he had seen the two officers at a distance, wondered who they were. His blue eyes darted from Minter to Zig Tinley on his return, reading there more than the others dreamed.

"I didn't see anythin' unusual," he announced to Minter.

"You stay here, cowboy. Them two fellers jist brung word of a gang of rustlers hidin' in the foothills. Me an' Zig will ride in pronto an' git a bunch to guard the herd."

Minter and his lame confederate sought their horses, swung behind a slope of the draw, and leisurely rode toward the ranch, taking care they did not attract the attention of Ballentine and his deputy. After some minutes they reined up in an arroyo and waited.

Joan Willoughby was standing beside the wire fence that enclosed the ranch garden, abstractedly watching Miss Leffenwell irrigating her struggling cosmos and carnations with a hose from the water pipe. Her gaze from time to time wandered across the cloudy early afternoon range toward the buff-gray blotch that was Toro. This had been an eventful Sunday—and the day was little more than half through. What a chain of tragic circumstances had wound about her in the brief two weeks since she had arrived at the Walking X! And what deeper tragedy had enmeshed the quiet, unassuming parson about whose good work Miss Leffenwell had so often written her!

His sermon, a confessional, had been delivered; he had laid aside his guns in surrender, tranquilly awaiting the appearance of his old foe to take him to prison, and that foe had stated plainly he would

not take him to prison, but would shoot him on sight. Joan had parted from him at the edge of town, had said good-by with a stoicism and calm she did not believe herself capable of.

Three faithful Walking X hands, one of them Tumbleweed Jones, sat astraddle a pegged tarpaulin in the lee of the bunk house over a deck of cards, nominally guarding the two Jaramillo prisoners—chiefly from the temper of Inocencia. The others had stayed in town or sneaked to town, in spite of Joan's wishes, to see Ballentine meet the Parson. Yet Tramer and Seres were not unfaithful; they would have fought for their employer if need be. And Hipkins had joined Lonnie Hazen and Jake Leach and some more in keeping an eye on Badger Brogan and his friends in the saloon.

Presently the girl turned and walked quickly to the house, oblivious to the chatter of Miss Leffenwell, who followed her in, discussing the merits of midday irrigation versus sprinkling. Joan had seen two figures on horseback winding about the base of the southern butte, had waited only long enough to note that they were not Walking X men. She had been waiting with full expectation that Speck Ballentine, on the way to Toro from the Ladrones trail, would pass the Walking X and, if news had reached him of her presence at the Carroll ranch, she knew he would hasten to pay her a brief visit, particularly before he went into a decisive battle with guns.

It had been six months previously that Speck

Ballentine had last ridden to El Paso to see her. She had told him then that she was still undecided about the thing that Ballentine desired above all else—a prompt marriage on her return to Loma Grande from school. Fate had woven a grotesque pattern of events since that day; it all seemed like a dream to her now.

She wanted to be alone when Ballentine arrived, and Miss Leffenwell had gone into the kitchen when the girl looked through the window and saw the erect figure of Ballentine in the saddle beside his boy companion. There was something about Speck Ballentine that had always spelled strength, power, self-reliance, to Joan. As he dismounted and swung in easy stride toward the gallery, her eyes fixed on the double holsters and his crossed cartridge belt and guns. When she went to the screen door, opened it, extended her hand and greeted the serious-faced sheriff, the very nearness of the deadly pistols at his hips sent a shudder through her.

"Joan!" The man held her hand, searched her eyes for something that he feared was there. Without shaking off the doubt, he spoke boldly. "Joan, *querida,* I've come to claim you. Today I lay down my guns for good. No more peace officer job, just quiet life on our ranch, with you!" His manner was earnest, solemn.

She drew away, beckoned him to sit. "Whether I am willing now or not?" she asked calmly, her dark eyes hardening a trifle.

Ballentine had taken a chair, and his hands rested on the scuffed holsters crowding the sides of his seat. "You gave me yore promise, Joan girl, that you'd marry me the day I took off my pistols forever."

She glanced from him through the window where cowboys were saddling horses on orders from Bill Minter, an act that she interpreted as a rush for town with the news of Ballentine's arrival to meet the Parson.

"I'll make the promise good, Speck Ballentine," she said, facing him, "if you take off your pistols now, before you meet Granger Hume!"

CHAPTER XXIX

THE PARSON SUMMONED

SPECK BALLENTINE'S long jaw went lax, and he looked at her with a puzzled, dumb expression, as though he had not heard aright, or, if hearing, did not believe his ears. Finally the corners of his solemn mouth went up in an uneasy smile. "If I don't—meet—Granger Hume," he repeated. Suddenly the intelligence dawned upon him.

He bent over in the chair to meet the calm, steady look of the girl that had followed pronouncement of her pledge. In this declaration, at last, was the something that Speck Ballentine had feared, speculated about, ever since the ride from the crest of Monte Largo. The man beat back the tide of jealousy that smote his soul. He answered her with a question:

"You know about the Parson—from that sermon yore foreman, Minter, told me he delivered awhile ago?"

"I know everything. I know about the word you sent him that you are planning to kill him." She remained standing, and he arose, loomed over her with his great height, his brooding eyes intently on her. Speck Ballentine had the qualities of manhood, he was one whom she had always felt she could trust to the utmost. Even now she wanted to be kindly and honest with him. He read the change in her mood, but read it slightly amiss.

"You don't like me to go gunnin' for a man like you always talked against?"

She nodded, without change of expression.

"It's good to see you again, Joan girl!" He stood awkwardly before her, noting the change in her since he had seen her last, a finer grace, he thought, slightly fuller figure, a more serious womanliness, eyes that were deeper, richer. Joan Willoughby had gone through a lot in the recent days, he surmised. "My but you're gettin' lovelier every day, *niña!*" He grinned foolishly and somewhat uncertainly.

"You aren't going to carry out your threat, are you?"

Ballentine's somber eyes closed and opened. "It wouldn't make any difference—to you—would it, if I did shoot the killer Granger Hume on sight?"

She was silent, calm; her gaze went through the window where the clamor of the hurrying cowboys was fading with their rush Quemadoward. She turned to him, smiling. "There! You're laying

down your guns now, aren't you? No more war, no more killing——"

He broke in with slow, gloomy tones. "You don't know what you are askin', Miss Joan. It would be ridiculous for an officer to try to arrest a fugitive like Granger Hume unarmed. Ridiculous, and suicide. Him that just shot Carl Gains to death——"

"That's false! I saw it all. A rustler knifed Gains!"

Ballentine frowned. "It don't change Hume's past record."

Her lips, grown suddenly thin and white, moved rapidly. "He will be unarmed. He has laid aside his guns. He has told all of Toro his guilt, and has said he would surrender!"

"You don't know Granger Hume like I do, Joan girl. Tricky. Just two weeks ago, he murdered Joe Stack—gun duel in the Ladrones. He knows I'm on the way. That's his manner of takin' me by surprise, Miss Joan!"

"He did not murder Joe Stack!"

"Mayhap I have the proof; but that ain't the charge I'm on his trail for. He killed Joe, all right, but——"

"It isn't true, and I know he will submit to arrest."

Ballentine smiled cynically. "I'll tell you something. Once in the Golden Eagle in Loma Grande, Granger Hume put up his guns—rule of the house

while the games were on. I saw him lay them on the bar, saw the bartender put them on the cabinet. Fifteen minutes later, when I walked over to arrest him, he had a full-sized forty-five Colt in his hand; he took mine from me, got his other two from the house, and was gone, makin' a laughin' stock of me——"

"Why didn't you put *your* guns up? Perhaps he knew?"

"He was a killer, an outlaw, and we had to outwit him. He turned the tables on me once, but never again——"

"What are you going to do?"

"Face him. Shoot him—on sight—like I warned him. Before he shoots me. Speck Ballentine never bluffs!"

Her cheeks had lost their color. "On sight," she repeated. "Even if he is unarmed, you'd shoot him down on sight? You say it is a trick." She took up from the mantel a square of cardboard, extended it. "This notice of his sermon was posted before he knew you were coming. I took it as a souvenir of a brave man's sacrifice. If he was a trickster, why should he confess?" She gazed while the sheriff read the notice, silently folded it and pocketed it. "Yet you would shoot him, whose every word and deed shows he loathes the old life he led. Mr. Ballentine, I want you to leave now and forever."

"Joan, *niña!*" The man's voice shook. "If I'd

trust Hume he'd kill me, usin' his old trick of cached guns. I don't mind that so much as something else. If I'd put up my guns now, I'd be a coward. Then you'd despise me—you couldn't help it. I'd never win you—never deserve it, Joan—if I don't fight it out, on the level, with Granger Hume. He's the quickest man that ever drew a gun in this country; I'm willing to take the chance. But fight him—fair and square—I must!"

Joan Willoughby stepped toward him menacingly, her lips quivering. "You will never win me, Speck Ballentine, if you fight Granger Hume!"

A sickly smile came to the sheriff's lips, twisting into a look akin to ferocity. "If you think so much as all that of this killin' parson, I might as well go along now, to get him quick!" He laughed in strained resignation. "I reckon it wouldn't do any good, no matter what I done, so far as you are concerned, Miss Joan. The Parson's got yore heart—I can see it plain enough!" His voice held a half snarl.

"I've already set my price," she answered calmly, wearily. "If I am not worth your promise not to shoot that man, at least until you see that he is armed, then you can go." She sank into a chair, heedless of faint, unusual sounds from the bunk house and the makeshift jail.

Speck Ballentine came to her, bent his awkward frame beside her. "Joan, *querida,* I love you—more'n any man ever loved a woman—too much to

offer you a coward's hand in marriage. I love you too much to take you even, if you want this Parson." He searched her eyes, grown dull and listless. She smiled, abstractedly tossed her head.

"You've made your choice, then," she said, quietly. She rose. "Just wait here one more minute!" She hurried away. In a moment she returned carrying a heavy belt, holsters and two ivory-handled guns, extended them. Ballentine reached for them, eagerly, avidly, scanned them with a practised eye, looked at the vacant loops of the trigger-guards where the triggers should have been.

"These are his guns—the ones he took off at the plaza," she said in measured tones. "A dozen men saw me get them, and you can ask our ranch hand, Tumbleweed."

"I know the guns. You've got my promise, Miss Joan. I won't shoot until I see he's wearing a pair of holsters and has his guns in view. I'll take a chance on another cached gun—for you *niña!*" He swung toward the door. She went with him, her lips curved in a wan smile.

"I felt you would do that," she said. "He won't be armed. You'll arrest him. I'll only ask one more favor. Forget what Granger Hume used to be; think of him as a new man, a good man. Help him pay his debt to society and try to restore him to useful citizenship as soon as possible. I do not believe he ever was a murderer, no matter how many men he may have killed."

Speck Ballentine nodded in a daze and left the room plunged in thought. He mounted his horse and rode off with Chick Gearing, head down, a frown of torment creasing his brow. Whether he had won a victory or had suffered his greatest defeat, he did not know.

But as he rode, his doubts grew. Farther removed from the girl's intimate presence, he patched together signs and words of hers that left to him no other interpretation than that her great overwhelming purpose was to spare the Parson. His lip curled, in memory of her desperate supplication in behalf of the preacher-gunman. But Speck Ballentine's jaw set, in firm resolve to fulfill his pledge. He addressed his companion.

"I reckon we got to change our plans, Chick," he said, thickly. "Recollect I said I wanted you to stay out of this, to be only a fair witness? I'll want you to do more—to stay in the background, but if he kills me, I want you to kill him, for the benefit of society."

The youthful deputy turned puzzled eyes on his superior. Ballentine explained. "I half reckon Granger Hume'll get the best of Speck Ballentine, Chick."

Gearing stood amazed. He worshipped Ballentine, believed he could outfight any gunman alive. And on the whole trip, the sheriff himself had been confident of success.

"You see, son, things are changed a bit. I've

given my word not to shoot on sight, until I make sure that Granger has got his pistols. It may cost me my life, dependin' on whether Granger has laid a deadfall for me with a cached gun or two. I want you to be ready to get him sure, if you see me drop, that's all. You'd better stay under cover and pick a likely place where you will be sure to pot him if I tumble."

At that moment Duffy Butler, getting wind of Bill Minter's jail-delivery scheme, was sending a frantic summons to Parson John to put on his guns to prevent an undoing of all he had accomplished that eventful Sunday morning.

CHAPTER XXX

NO TIME TO LOSE

IN the absence of loyal men folks about the Walking X at this moment, Duffy Butler, on Minter's trail, dispatched to summon the Parson the only messenger at hand, the redoubtable Inocencia, who, in spite of her two hundred and eighty pounds, could ride like a trooper.

A game of hide-and-seek was being played about the long adobe bunk house which prevented Duffy getting word to Joan Willoughby. Within the big house all had grown quiet; Tumbleweed and his three cowboy companions had departed for Quemado Buttes, on Minter's false alarm. Joan remained at the window, thinking, oblivious to the rising sand storm and the excitement that had a few minutes previously taken the men away, so engrossed was she in her own thoughts. In the swirling dust of the horse corral she had not seen the fat *moza* depart in the wake of Ballentine and his deputy, by a slightly straighter trail to Toro.

Meanwhile, back of the men's quarters building, Minter and his two confederates peered cautiously around the north wall to make sure their presence had not been observed. They had watched Speck Ballentine depart and were ready to proceed with business when they saw the Mexican cook sprint to the corral and ride away. This had surprised them, made them more cautious, but they concluded the *moza* had been sent by Joan on a hasty mission to overtake Ballentine.

Once Zig Tinley thought he had seen a cow-puncher lurking near the ranch kitchen, but the churning dust made him uncertain. Now they watched to make sure.

They did not suspect that a pair of honest blue eyes was checking their every move—least of all did they suspect Duffy Butler, the innocent-looking " big boy " whom Minter had picked to remain at the Quemado cow camp. Duffy watched them from the far end of the kitchen, behind which stood the bronco that had trailed the trio from the Buttes. The big cowboy's suspicions had been aroused by Minter's orders to ride to the south butte and back, then by the sudden departure of the two punchers with the strange rider of the unbranded horse. Duffy had followed.

He had guessed accurately their purpose to free the prisoners and perhaps attempt a general jail delivery in Toro, and had risked a shot to enter the kitchen and dispatch Inocencia to the Parson. Now,

with odds of three to one, his task was to balk or at least delay them. He raised his six-shooter, considered firing into the air; such an alarm might drive them off.

He lowered the weapon, when he reflected that such action would bring Joan Willoughby and Miss Leffenwell to the scene and gravely endanger them; these men, caught red-handed, might not hesitate to shoot down women to cover their own tracks.

The sand storm favored him. In a burst of dust he streaked out from the kitchen, passed the window where Joan was sitting, unmindful of his passing, and reached the front of the bunk house row. He darted into the deserted room next to the " jail " and after cautiously closing the door went to the little window in the rear. Removing his hat, he thrust his head up close to the edge of the aperture, ears straining.

Something crunched with a dull sound against the closed door behind him. He left the window quickly, listened, and tried the door. It would not yield. Duffy Butler realized fully what had happened; they had seen him, had thrown a heavy *viga* beam against the door, one that had been standing loose against the adobe wall. He was trapped in the room, save for the window, and it was barred, for in the early days the Walking X bunk house had been the casa of a hacienda. He heard Minter's hoarse chuckle, to one side of the window:

" C'mon, everything's clear. Whoever that skunk

is, is lucky we didn't drill him! You watch the winder, Zig! C'mon, Luis!"

An answer: "*Seguro si!*" A pair of boots thudded on the hard ground, then another.

Minter's voice continued: "Foller us. We trail for the Lazy H—got hosses saddled an' waitin' for you two. Ballentine's started to town to take the Parson. We let him put the handcuffs on that hombre before we make our play. Then we ride in with our gang. Ask yore *amigo,* Laigs!"

Duffy Butler moved his face as near to the iron bars as possible and thrust out the barrel of his gun. It was a sorry attempt, he realized, and he dreaded bringing the women out of the house to face these desperate men. But he risked a chance on routing them, and pulled the trigger. As the big gun shook with the explosion, the weapon was slugged from his hand with some sort of a club. He heard Minter's snarl, and the adobe dirt flew about the window ledge to the accompaniment of a fusilade of bullets.

"You got guns for us?" barked a gruff voice, that of Gringo Charley.

"There's plenty at the Lazy H!" Sounds of stepping horses and creaking saddle leather told they were mounting. Swiftly came the chop-chopping of galloping broncos. Duffy Butler heard the excited voices of the women.

He dug into the soft adobe bricks with his clasp knife, prying at the iron bars, and shouted while

he worked. Joan Willoughby answered, under the window. "What is it? Who is there?"

"Pris'ners escaped!" cried the puncher. "Get me out—can you topple over that timber against the door?—Other side of the house!"

Silence for a few minutes, then a bumping beam. Duffy shoved out the door, leaped into the yard. "Gimme a gun! Miss Joan, they're goin' to make a raid—" He broke off short, whirled to face a black object coming out of the sand wind. "Who's that? Whoopee! Th' Parson, shore as Chris'mus!" The rider was spurting from the cottonwoods. Man and girl raced toward him.

"Pris'ners escaped!" howled Duffy. "Minter an' Zig an' some reptyle from Brogan's layout—took 'em jist this minute!" He flung up an arm toward the dust cloud east. "They're goin' to get their whole gang an' go after Badger! Decoyed guards to th' Buttes!"

"Saw them!" muttered the Parson, grimly. "Had no gun. Ride for Quemado, pronto, with the alarm, Duffy; bring that gang to town!"

"You got no gun?" The "big boy" stared. "Yuh get my message, from Inocencia?"

"Not yet; saw her and dodged her, like I did Ballentine. Get going, Duffy! Not a minute to lose!"

"Gimme a gun! Oh, some son-of-a-gun gimme a gun!" The big cowboy's request was almost a prayer. "They took mine!"

"Never mind the gun; bring the others! Ride!"

The obedient puncher sank spurs, raked his bronco, tore out through the dust and mesquite, north.

The Parson had slid from the saddle, taken the arm of the dazed Joan rather roughly, piloted her toward the ranch house. "I came at a lucky time," he was saying hurriedly. "Came on a pure hunch —not to say good-by again, like I considered doing a long time after you left! I thought it over—that threat of Ballentine to shoot on sight—knew he'd do it, in spite of sin. Figured the only way to make him change his mind was to meet him, on his own terms. Don't interrupt, please! Now this thing has happened. Minter's a traitor, so's Tinley—worse than we feared. We'll need every man—maybe more—to fight that bunch and hold the prisoners in Jake Leach's place. You've got to hand back my guns—to teach Ballentine his manners—to save the Walking X from the Jaramillo tribe." He was crowding her into the door of the living room as the sand gale raced howling across the gallery, while Miss Leffenwell struggled to hold her feet behind them.

Joan Willoughby clutched at his shoulder, fought back the brute strength that was crowding her inside. "You can't do that," she defied him. "You have given up your arms, for good!"

"Where are they? Where have you put them?"

he demanded with a grim purpose that frightened her. "Quickly! No time to lose!"

"You shan't!" She backed away from him, arms limp. "You shan't!" She laughed bitterly, in derision at his sudden, over-riding tactics, so unlike the Parson of the past. "I've hidden them—you'll never find them!"

Granger Hume straightened at sight of Dick Carroll's six-shooter hanging on a peg in the narrow hall. He reached for the gun and the big belt and holster, began strapping them on.

"What are you going to do?" she flung at him, angrily.

"I'm taking this, then," he returned quietly, fingers working deftly.

"You cannot! You must not!" Her eyes were burning, beseeching.

"I'd do better with my own single triggerless sixes, and my own double holsters, but this will have to do!"

"No!" She took hold of the cartridge belt. "I'll tell you where your guns are—in my bedroom, on top of the bureau, where I laid them—if you've got to use any guns at all! Please get them!"

CHAPTER XXXI

GOD AND THE RIO GRANDE

FOR an instant Joan Willoughby stood by the doorway of the hall watching the lean, retreating figure of the Parson turn toward her room. In the tense excitement of the moment it had not occurred to her that sending the man into her room for the guns instead of going herself might appear strange to the Parson. She had acted on impulse, and, as is often the case, her woman's instinct had guided her into a logical channel of action that she had not thought out, but that had come to her unerringly. She turned quickly, darted to the gallery, down the steps into the sand gale, without stopping for a wrap. In another moment she had taken the stirrups of the only saddled horse —that of the Parson—set her heels to the animal's flanks, and spurted off in the gray storm, south.

Very definitely now she knew what she was about —to overtake Speck Ballentine.

Over the flat range toward Toro the two peace

officers were riding slowly, the man of the brooding eyes and serious face, and his youthful companion. Few words had they spoken as they walked their tired horses through the incessant sweep of sand and wind. From time to time Chick Gearing turned his head, noting that the sad features of Ballentine were longer and more doleful than usual. He did not know the thoughts that made them so, thoughts having to do with Joan Willoughby. Once, during a break in the wind, he spoke:

"Gosh, you're gloomy, Speck. You can drill that skunk easy!"

The man's expression did not change; he drew his bronco's head near to that of Gearing, down wind, and reined up.

"Son, I reckon I am gloomy. But it's not thinkin' of what's due mighty soon in Toro town. You remember that. And if Granger Hume, tricky as he always was, sends lead into me first, I'll want you to know it was not because I was too slow, but because I was sick, inside. If you ever get to be a bachelor, son, and after waitin' six years for a certain girl you lose her, you'll mayhap understand." He touched the rein to his mount's neck, went forward, while his companion, wondering, rode with him in silence.

Speck Ballentine had given partial voice to his gloomiest thoughts; in fact, he exaggerated, for he was not wholly convinced even yet that his girl of Loma Grande had come to love his old enemy.

With startling swiftness he was to learn the difference between suspicion and what he considered reality. From behind, up wind, drifted the muffled sound of hoof-beats and a woman's hail. The two riders wheeled their mounts. They saw Joan Willoughby straighten and slow up from a gallop, her dark hair whipping in the wind. She was beside them, cheeks glowing, eyes unnaturally large and bright.

"I've come—to tell you—not to shoot—even if you see the Parson wearing—guns!" she gasped. "The prisoners have escaped, and he is just leaving the ranch for town—with his guns—to prevent the release of all that bandit gang in Toro. I give you my word he will submit to arrest, and won't try to shoot you, Mr. Ballentine!"

The sheriff sat rigid, a faint yellow glint deep within the irises of his blue-black eyes. His long, solemn face took on a sudden savagery. The word "holdout" formed on his lips, but he did not utter it. Instead he asked in even tones:

"Granger Hume was at yore house when I was there, and didn't try to kill me? That right, Miss Joan?"

"No, he came later—after you left—just as those two outlaws at our bunk house rode away——"

"I thought so! Didn't think he'd be there and let me ride away, alive." Speck Ballentine turned his horse. "That all you got to say, lady?"

There was that in his tone and mode of address

that chilled the girl. "Oh! Give me your promise, Mr. Ballentine, promise you will not shoot, but meet him amicably and help him hold Badger Brogan's men! Then he will be your prisoner, willingly!"

Speck Ballentine chuckled, lightly, dryly. Abruptly his lips froze together in a thin tight line; the ashen hue of his face turned a purplish red. The girl recoiled, at a look that she did not identify with the man's jealousy—had she not promised to marry him, conditionally? Speck Ballentine held in check an insane rage that flamed within; through compressed lips he shot out evenly modulated words, spoken rapidly, jerkily:

"Promise you! Promise you—promise this and promise that! Reckon that's all Speck Ballentine's good for! To make promises to save this killer and outlaw, Granger Hume, that's been hunted by the law for a half dozen years! Anything to save that skunk's hide! Anything! And me—the one that's waited years, till you got through school, till you was dead sure—me, that could have taken other girls but stayed clean waitin' for you—where do I come in? Only to help out this other lad that's taken my place, Joan! Him—a killer—you begged me to put up guns before you'd marry me, but you'd pick the worst gun-toter in New Mexico and West Texas since the days of the Kid—to take my place! Bah! Don't say it! I know you promised, half an hour ago, to marry me—if I'd spare the precious hide of Granger Hume, and make his sentence easy, help

him to cheat justice and get out of jail again, to preach to more women folks!"

"Speck Ballentine! You are unfair. You——"

"Don't say it, lady! I ain't a fool—even with women. I know how I stand, now! Thank Granger I came to Toro, if only to find that out! You'd do anything—go to any lengths, to save this killer's life—even to offerin' yoreself to me——"

The girl screamed, clutched at his coat across her saddle, shook at him, to rouse him from the deadly hate that had seized him—hate for Granger Hume, hate for this girl that he genuinely loved—the hate of jealousy. The sober-face man laughed, coldly, without mirth, and his lips curled into a cynical loathing for her. "And now you come a-ridin', in a storm, without a coat, nigh freezin' to death. Why? Not for my sake—not for Speck Ballentine's sake! No! For the sake of Granger Hume—to save that killer and give him all the chance in the world, *even when he's got his guns on!*"

"It's a lie, a lie, Speck Ballentine! You're unfair! You are a coward, to talk like that. Haven't I said I'd marry you? Oh, what more could I do? Her trembling fingers grasped the saddle horn, supported her weight from falling. The man drew back from her, head down to shield his eyes from the whipping sand. He shot out hoarse words:

"To save Granger Hume—that's why you offered to marry me! Now listen to me, lady! If you want to save that two-gun artist's hide, go back

to him pronto—look him up, before he starts ridin' for me. Tell him to wear his guns, and to hold his hands where he can make the draw. Because if he don't, Speck Ballentine's goin' to shoot him, shore as God made the Rio Grande, shore as he's a lyin' hypocrite of a preacher that killed Joe Stack and a lot more, shore as this whole layout about a rescue is a trick. *Adiós"*

Speck Ballentine whirled, brought his bronco to his feet, headed south; he raised a hand in gesture to his youthful deputy, heedless of the girl's muffled scream. He raked his horse's flanks, tore through the greasewood and mesquite, Chick Gearing a length behind.

CHAPTER XXXII

"TO STEAL HIS TRICK"

TEN minutes later Speck Ballentine drew out of the gallop. Letting Chick Gearing come up beside him, he reined up to a sudden stop, in a waste of sand and screw bean.

"I feel better. I ain't gloomy any more, Chick boy—just plain ornery, and mad! All I'm waitin' for now is a sight of Granger Hume!"

"What'll we do?" asked the youth, cautiously, deferentially. In spite of his act of range courtesy in drawing aside when the sheriff and the girl talked, Gearing had heard enough to understand.

"I'm goin' to make that hombre fight—if he ain't a coward. We'll hit town before he does. When I go back to Loma Grande I'm goin' to be able to hold my head up—and I'm goin' back! How's yore Winchester?" motioning toward the deputy's saddle scabbard.

"Loaded," replied the other, wondering.

"You're better with the rifle than the six. But

you won't need either. Keep it loaded if you want to, son—you're sheriff if I fall and can pot yore man with the rifle, from a distance, like we planned. But—" Ballentine smiled grimly. "Keep out of my way, Chick. Don't put in yore horn. You won't need to shoot, because the man don't breathe that can get Speck Ballentine today!"

He raised a hand in a sweeping gesture toward the south. "Toro town's right ahead, a half a mile. You ride in first. I don't want to be seen comin' into town with any bodyguard. Hand me that lead pencil of yours."

Ballentine had swung down. He took the pencil, drew from an inside pocket the folded cardboard given him by Joan, containing the Parson's sermon notice. For a moment he studied the lettering, then turned the cardboard over on its blank white side and laid it against his saddle. With deft fingers he drew straight letters on the blank, working silently for some minutes, while the deputy stared.

"That'll do." Ballentine remounted. "Now you ride. Take this along." He thrust the notice into the deputy's hand. "Stick it up in front of the postoffice; there won't be many around there to see you, on Sunday, and if they do, you're puttin' it up for the Parson. This'll spike his guns, and make him come out into the open, where he won't try any tricks under his mask of a repentant preacher. *Hasta luego!*"

Speck Ballentine loitered along in the storm after

Chick Gearing had gone on. Some minutes later than his deputy, he reached the sand-clouded end of the street.

The Parson had not arrived with news of the escape, and Duffy Butler had not had time to bring the Walking X hands from Quemado Buttes. Hence Toro was quiet in spite of the large crowd of idlers, who, since morning, had stayed on to see the entry of Speck Ballentine and what he would do in the way of "shooting the Parson on sight," as he had threatened in his note, read from the plaza band stand. A group of men, perhaps a dozen, including Don Alfredo, braved the sand blizzard in the street in front of the White Man's saloon where Lonnie Hazen, Hip Hipkins, Tramer, Ramon Seres and two others sat hunched up on the walk, armed with rifles and six-shooters, guarding Badger Brogan and his disarmed followers in the saloon.

These had not seen the quiet entry of Chick Gearing, from the lower end of the street, which was deserted in front of closed stores and other establishments; they had not seen the deeply stick up the sign in the inside of the postoffice window. Hazen, neckerchief pulled up over his nose to keep out the blowing grit, rose from the edge of the sidewalk, first to spot the lanky figure of Speck Ballentine in the saddle. He yanked down his muffler and murmured the news at the moment that other eyes saw the roan horse emerge from a white cloud of lashing sand, the man with the flopping broad hat astride.

Speck Ballentine was riding erect, legs straight in the stirrups, figure scarcely swaying with the motion of his mount. He turned in to the group of men at the boardwalk, his gloomy eyes taking swift note of every man and all things that moved in the thoroughfare beyond. "A little windy, gents," he drawled, stepping down.

"How do, sheriff," greeted Lonnie Hazen. Others nodded mechanically, or held themselves with careless outward indifference. The officer tied his horse unhurriedly at the hitch rack beside others standing there. "We've got a surprise for you, sheriff. Badger Brogan's gang, includin' Badger and Jerry Gore, are bein' held in the White Man's saloon, pris'ners for you. That's what we have been doin', with our guns—actin' guards. Funny thing, sheriff, Brogan an' his bunch were captured by the Parson, before he confessed to bein' Granger Hume, and took off his guns waitin' to surrender when you come." Muffled sounds of ribald song drifted from behind the closed doors of the saloon, where the prisoners were obviously enjoying Jake Leach's liquor to the utmost.

Ballentine squinted down the windy street in the direction of the postoffice. "Uh huh," he droned slowly, turning furtively and gazing up the thoroughfare, whence he had come. "Where's Granger now?"

"He left word he'd be waitin' for you, to surrender, at the Painted Pony, back room at

three o'clock. It's mighty close to that time now." Hazen looked at his watch. "It's three night now."

Ballentine's long face remained immobile. "Up to his old tricks," he mused, aloud. "You don't scarcely expect me to believe that surrender talk, Lonnie?" The sheriff walked with an easy, rolling stride onto the sidewalk, while curious bystanders drew up to overhear the exchanges between Hazen and the officer. Proceeding slowly toward the post-office Ballentine listened attentively to what Hazen had to say.

"Oh, he'll make the peace sign, all right, Speck. He confessed to the whole thing, bein' a killer and all. Laid down his sixes this mornin'—turned 'em over to Miss Willoughby of the Walkin' X, where he was foreman after Dick Carroll was hung. Yes, sir, the Parson's gun days are over, sheriff!"

They had reached the postoffice. Ballentine's dark eyes flitted back and forth along the front of the building. They did not need to search long. The sheriff twisted his thumb toward the lettered cardboard against the window pane, on which was printed in the same characters used by the Parson in his placard announcing his sermon the night before:

NOTICE

I, Granger Hume, give warning that if Speck Ballentine tries to take me, I will shoot him on sight.

"How about that?" queried the sheriff, a faint grin registering on the serious face.

Lonnie Hazen and the others had read it; they reread it, scarcely believing, yet not doubting, exchanged glances with one another, and turned to the officer.

"It's about time for said Parson to arrive," murmured Ballentine. "And there's shore goin' to be shootin—on sight. I'd be obliged to you folks if you'd step aside; now I hear a horse, up wind." His eyes were focused up the street, beyond the White Man's saloon. "He'll get an even break, and I'll wait till he gets afoot, off his bronc."

Speck Ballentine darted to the side of the boardwalk, against the row of low buildings. As he did so, he caught a fleeting vision of a dust-hazy human form on the roof of the Full House saloon, just across the street, and as it vanished he saw that the figure held a rifle. Chick Gearing was getting ready to play sheriff, in an emergency. Ballentine's jaw set; he did not like the idea—was certain the deputy's weapon would never be called into play. He cast another glance upward; the boy had hidden himself behind the false front of the building. It didn't seem exactly right to Ballentine; it savored too much of an ambush, although he knew Gearing would not shoot until his superior fell.

Speck Ballentine set his gaze up the street and advanced. His holsters were in place, filled with two big six-guns the barrels of which he had wiped

clean of sand ten minutes before, on the ride in. The weapons were filled to the last chamber with .45 caliber cartridges. As the sheriff went forward, cat-like, close to the walls of the buildings, his brain whirled with the thought:

"The Lord knows I'm not cheatin', puttin' up that sign, because Granger Hume is shore goin' to try to kill me anyway, like he did Joe Stack and others, and all that sign does is to smoke him out, tell these folks the truth—to steal his trick!"

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE PARSON ARRIVES

GRANGER HUME had arrived, unseen. Now he rode openly down the dusty street as far as Jake Leach's place, dismounted, flipped the bridle-knotted reins over his pony's head without securing them, and strode up to Hipkins, Tramer and Seres, who remained on guard in front of the saloon. His eyes squinted over the spotted neckerchief that was tied high on his face, seeing through the storm the scattered figures of the crowd down the street toward the postoffice. One of these, he knew, was Speck Ballentine, for the reason that the Parson had been seated on his horse for full five minutes behind the row of buildings, at the edge of a vacant, weed-grown lot, observing through gaps in the sand clouds the scene in the street. He had arrived almost on the heels of the sheriff, and his gaze had followed Ballentine down the street to the postoffice. Then the Parson had swung quickly back and loped into the open toward the White Man's House.

The range minister was wearing his double guns.

He was not ignorant of Speck Ballentine's intentions now, for he had spent a tense few minutes with Joan Willoughby after starting for Toro. Astonished as he had been to find his horse gone when he emerged from the ranch house with his guns, the Parson had hurriedly roped and saddled another animal from the corral. Miss Leffenwell had told him of Joan's strange actions, and the Parson guessed she was riding to overtake Speck Ballentine.

He had galloped through the sand gale, and, although Joan had a start of some minutes, he came upon the girl near the spot where Ballentine and Gearing had left her, almost on the instant of their departure. Joan, face blanched and eyes holding much of terror in them, had just turned to go back to warn the Parson of his new peril. Luck was with her in the meeting, for the storm here was obscuring the range a few hundred yards on either side.

She swerved toward him, her hand shielding her face from the biting sand. "Don't go!" she called, in tones scarce above a whisper, leaning from the saddle. "He's crazy—won't listen—wants to fight you. He won't believe you are in earnest about giving yourself up! Oh, please ride away—anywhere—don't go to Toro. I'll ride there, now that I've warned you, and give the news about the escape of the prisoners!"

The Parson's jaw was out-thrust, his face serious.

"Miss Joan, you're in no condition, and besides I'm needed in town, where every gun is urgent to keep Brogan's buckaroos from escaping. If you don't mind, I'll take my horse and give you this one." He swung down. The girl dismounted in quick response. As they exchanged reins and remounted, she crowded against his saddle, pleading with him.

"I'm begging you not to go. It will mean one of you will surely be killed! Better let Brogan escape—better let the Walking X be robbed, than that! I argued with Ballentine, beseeched him. He wouldn't listen. He wouldn't even believe Brogan's men are planning to free those prisoners. I offered him everything—even to marry him, if he would trust you!"

"You offered him—that?" asked the Parson, slowly. His frame stiffened in the saddle.

"Don't you understand? He's wanted me to marry him—for six years. He has been honorable and upright and clean in everything, but he won't trust you, won't believe you are not planning to shoot him on sight. I pleaded with him, offered to marry him, if he would avoid a gun battle. At the house he promised he would, but some devil seized him out there after I overtook him. He turned even against me, accused me of doing this for your sake——"

"And it wasn't for my sake at all?" The Parson sat motionless, waiting for her to answer. She held silence, and his light eyes contracted under close-drawn lids. "If it *wasn't* for my sake, Miss Joan,

why'd you say back there that I better get my own guns if I was going to use any at all?"

"It wouldn't be fair, with him wearing two!"

"Miss Joan, I've got to be riding—pronto—or it'll be too late to head off the Lazy H bunch. I won't run away, like you asked—I'd hate myself always if I did. I'll promise you Speck Ballentine will be spared for the wedding—and Granger Hume won't break his oath. You ride back to the ranch now, and look after yourself. I'd like to say a lot of things, how much I appreciate you and what you have done, since I have known you. I've said too much already. I'll say good-by now—I'm only a fugitive, and if I come through this ruckus, I'll be in jail in another week for long years ahead." He extended his hand ungloved, on the wrist of which was the imprint of the gun tattoo. Her fingers met his, trembling, clung to his. He withdrew quickly, set spurs to his mount, and dashed away in the gale.

He pressed the wiry little horse to the utmost, had no difficulty in overtaking the slow-traveling sheriff. He slowed behind Ballentine, watched him moving down the street with a crowd of the curious. Ballentine's youthful deputy was not with the sheriff, and that fact troubled the Parson a little. He dismissed the thought; Speck Ballentine would fight his own battles without a gunmate, he felt sure.

Now as the Parson strode up to Hip Hipkins and his two armed companions on the sidewalk, he presented the appearance of the alert, guarded gun-

fighter. He was wearing the Mexican sombrero, the deer skin cape, the ornate boots that had marked him as Granger Hume in the past, the apparel he had dug out of the old box trunk that same Sunday morning. Hipkins, Tramer and Seres noted the guns that swung in the open holsters at his sides; this was unexpected, after the dramatic scene in the plaza when the parson-fugitive had laid down his guns in token of surrender. None of these three had yet seen the notice of war carrying the Parson's name, as posted at the postoffice by Ballentine's deputy.

"Hello, Pars' John," murmured Hipkins, softly. "You ready for Speck, after all! I calculated——"

"Howdy, gents," broke in the other quickly, halting for an instant. "Gringo Charley and Luis Escobar have been taken out of the bunk house by Minter, Zig Tinley and a Jaramillo man. They've started for the Lazy H to round up Brogan's other hands and try a jail delivery here. It looks like a battle and bloodshed, but I've got a plan." His eyes swept the street, as far as the sand storm would permit. With surprising suddenness, while the guards stared, the Parson darted over the walk and into the hotel entrance of the White Man's House.

"He's shore goin' to shoot it out with Ballentine!" murmured Tramer, while Hipkins stood at the edge of the sidewalk, eyes bulging. "Yuh see them guns!"

"*Madre!*" Seres bent his gaze down the street,

where Lonnie Hazen and some of the others were coming up. "The son-of-a-gun—after he said he would geev up without a fight!"

A jerking of the doors of the saloon behind them brought them all whirling, with their guns up They heard the warning, sibilant note of the Parson, the tramping of feet, heard the command the gun-fighter was uttering to Badger Brogan and his confederates. "Single-file!" The Parson's guns were still sheathed, but he was obeyed.

"Hipkins, you and Tramer and Seres take this gang to the Walking X, will you, and lock 'em up in that same bunk house room where the others were. That'll hold them till we can get enough men to defend them. I've got business with Speck Ballentine. If you see the sheriff, tell him to look to his guns!"

Before the surprised Hipkins or his companions could remonstrate or give assent to this sudden new program, the Parson had vanished within the hallway between the saloon and hotel.

"A danged good hunch," chuckled the loyal Hipkins, as Badger Brogan, with Jerry Gore, bandaged where shoulder and arm met, and the nine other rustlers stood awkwardly on the sidewalk, weaponless, awaiting orders. Zack Greevey, who stood painfully on one leg, had hobbled out with difficulty, and the long-haired "Granger Hume" showed a bandage on one hand, the result of the mercy work of Doctor Chaves.

"You hombres," Hipkins gestured toward Brogan, "have got to walk, except Jerry an' that skunk with the crippled toes, and watch yore step." The veteran buster helped Gore and Greevey to horses, turned to his two companions. "I'll ride point. Ramon, you swing, an' you kin trail, Tramer." Hipkins untied his own horse and climbed into the saddle, gun out. The other two Walking X guards followed his example. "I hate like sin to miss this set-to between the Parson an' Ballentine," muttered Hip, "not mentionin' what little gin these jail-birds overlooked in Jake's bar. But we got to be moseyin', pronto, before that orn'ry, lousy, contemp'ble, onmitigated crew of Jaramillo scum comes ridin' in here bent on murder. Doggone—Speck's coming up the street this very second! My bet is on the Parson. But we cain't wait—they might play hidey-go-seek an hour!"

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE HUNTER HUNTED

BEFORE Hipkins had got the motley line fairly moving Lonnie Hazen came running up the street, emerging from a geyser of powdery dust. Stragglers who had taken vantage points to watch Speck Ballentine's man-hunt step by step, came trudging up more cautiously, aware that something unusual was happening at the White Man's saloon.

"What's all this mean?" yelled Hazen, to the Walking X guards in the saddle, engaged in stringing out the line of prisoners. Hipkins wheeled suddenly, recognizing the voice of the bow-legged little cowman; he stepped his bronco back to the sidewalk, leaned from the saddle.

"Everythin's all right, Lonnie; we're movin' these thieves for safety." He lowered his tones. "Bill Minter an' the rest of Brogan's outfit is goin' to try a rescue. Minter's freed Gringo an' Luis. I don't want these skunks to know about the break

they're hatchin'. Takin' 'em to the Walkin' X on the q. t. Parson jist brung the news."

"He did, eh?" Hazen turned, looked keenly about him: "Where's the Parson now?"

"Gone."

"He's wearin' guns?"

"I bet me he is. There's goin' to be exchanges, between him and Speck: I'm neutral, bettin' agin the law, after the way Granger Hume, the preacher, corralled this gang this mornin'."

"So'm I." Hazen looked suspiciously toward the curious ones behind him. "Looks like the notice at the postoffice means business," he droned, as though to himself.

"Huh? What notice's that?" demanded Hipkins.

"Notice that Granger Hume'll shoot Speck Ballentine if he tries to arrest him. Them for it. You better get goin', Hip—no tellin' what'll leak out, with all those ears around!"

"Where's the sheriff now?"

"Comin'. Got both guns in hand, too."

"Dang me, I'd wait, and herd this bunch over there in the plaza till they shot it out, if it wasn't them others are due any minute. C'mon, use yore laigs!" He brought his pony around, flanked the sullen infantry, in a swirl of blown sand, and headed out the street at a slow gait, past Tramer and Seres and the two wounded prisoners in the saddle,

chuckling at the epithet that the scowling king of the Jaramillo hurled at him as he passed.

Meanwhile the Parson was not idle. He had last been seen going into the hotel door. Without a word of explanation to Jake Leach, he mounted the staircase to the rooms above, while the proprietor narrowed his eyes on him unresisting. The Parson realized fully that it would look bad for him if it were noised around that he had taken cover in the White Man's House, while Speck hunted him in the street. But it was necessary, for the purpose he had in mind, to learn exactly where the sheriff was moving, in the direction he was going, the progress he was making. Finding a window facing the street, one of those Artley and Zack Greevey had used that same morning, the Parson raised the lower frame cautiously.

A flash of color, red neckerchief, white blouse, brown skirt, caught his eye across the street. The Parson's eyes widened at realization that Joan Willoughby, hatless and coatless, had ridden behind him and was even now watching from a passageway between buildings the drama that was being enacted in the street. The Parson drew his face close to the window ledge and looked down at the figure of a man crouched along the wall, moving step by step, slowly and with caution, toward the saloon.

He could have slain the sheriff then and there, but backed away quickly, took the hall and bolted down the rear steps, hands on his holsters as he ran. He

had seen that Speck Ballentine was taking no chances on the draw, had already taken out his two big forty-fives, ready for the thumb touch on the hammers that would send flame and lead toward his antagonist.

" It's too late for argument or negotiations now, " the Parson reflected as he hurried along. What Joan Willoughby had told him gave the key to the sheriff's grim purpose. Ballentine had come to Toro, not to arrest his man, but to meet him gun to gun, as his note had said. There was reason why Speck Ballentine would not trust his old foe, perhaps, for Granger Hume, in his warrior days, although never taking an unfair advantage of an antagonist, had used his wits as well as his guns.

In some way, the Parson knew, Speck Ballentine had been informed of Joan Willoughby's partiality toward the preacher. There was nothing to indicate that her interest in him was significant; he did not think she reciprocated the feeling that had been growing within him for this girl of Walking X. But Speck Ballentine, if what Joan said was correct, had became inflamed with the fear that he was losing the woman he planned to marry. This was a thing that argument could not prevail against.

From the time he had left her on the trail to town, the Parson had debated with himself the meaning of Joan's contradictory actions. There was the faint hope that she might have sought to save the Parson from the guns of the sheriff, up to the point where

she told of her promise to marry Speck Ballentine. It was too much for any man to presume that she had made such a promise merely to save him. No, she did not want to see bloodshed, but if there was any interest of the heart, it was to spare Ballentine.

As the Parson passed the landing at the rear of the White Man's House and moved with quick step through the passage between the hotel and Lee Jon's restaurant, toward the street, Speck Ballentine continued to advance. His steps were even more cautious now as he neared the saloon where, a few minutes previously, the hated gunman of the Rio Grande had gone. Heedless of the crowd of captive rustlers who had surged out of the place, heedless of the scattering crowd that had drawn away from the sidewalk to leave the line of fire clear, fading into buildings, doorways and the plaza across the street, Speck Ballentine kept his somber eyes focused on the entrance to the barroom. As an officer, it was his duty to hunt the fugitive down, to take the initiative. But Speck Ballentine was taking no rash chances of a trap in the White Man's saloon. Granger Hume would have the advantage there, behind cover of the bar, a door, or a side room. Ballentine had reached fifty paces from the saloon entrance and halted.

While Ballentine halted, still, crouching, neck thrust forward, his face saturnine, a satanic flicker in his blue-black eyes, his two guns at hip ready for any darting figure that might appear, no matter how swiftly, his nerves leaped at the familiar, menacing

tones of his old foe above the whistle of the wind, not ten paces behind him:

"Turn and shoot Speck Ballentine, if yuh think yo're swift enough to make the move, and beat the guns of Granger Hume!"

And Joan Willoughby, on the sidewalk across the street, uttered a low scream that died in the gale when she saw the belt, holsters and guns of the Parson of Toro slide from him and slip to the warped boards at his feet, in the middle of the sidewalk.

CHAPTER XXXV

A QUICK CLEANUP

DEATH, swift and certain, etched a realistic picture in the brain of Speck Ballentine in the brief instant he stood shocked into statue-like immobility. As in great crises of danger the mind leaps chasms of years, so the sheriff heard the double roar of guns, felt the stab of doom, sank into nothingness, yet saw the curious crowd come up slowly to look at him, lift his limp lifeless form, hold ceremony over him. He shuddered, though a brave man, continuing to stand with boots weighted as with chains, and his rational wits declared that he never could make the swing around and hurl his darts of lead in time. Granger Hume would knock him down with lethal sledges before he could tilt the muzzles of his pistols.

How like the killer-preacher to trick him from behind! How well the sheriff had judged the sanctimonious gunman. Such a fox would shoot to kill, and he held trumps. Speck Ballentine's arms

began to lift, slowly, then with a jerk, while his body did not stir the fraction of an inch.

The hands went up with the guns in them; the fingers loosened, released their hold. The two big Colts tumbled out in a somersaulting arc, and bounded to the boardwalk. Still Speck Ballentine did not turn. He heard the torturer's voice:

"Now sheriff, let's see yore face!"

Defiantly the victim swung about, to face with cooler nerve the man whose ruse had made even the courage of Speck Ballentine futile. As the officer beheld the hands-in-pockets, smiling Parson, unarmed, unchallenging, wholly defenseless, his eyes closed and opened, then lit suddenly with primitive deviltry. He darted downward, clutching out with his two hands, came up to his knees with his fallen pistols. They leaped to his hips, but the thumbs did not twitch the hammers. His antagonist had not reached for a gun, anywhere; but continued to stand, an unshaken figure of mockery or contriteness—Speck Ballentine did not know which.

The sheriff thrust his weapons into his sagging holsters, shrugged, and blinked at sight of the six-shooters and trappings on the sidewalk behind the dreaded Granger Hume who was speaking again:

"Now you know I mean it, I reckon, when I said I'd give myself up. Seems like a six-shooter argument is the only one that would force you into trusting me, sheriff!" The Parson's expression had grown serious, his language dignified. "If

you want me to, I'm at your service to help hold Brogan's men against the rescue party that's on the way. But I am your prisoner. What are your orders?"

A blur of color moved in the drab grayness of the storm—red neckerchief, white blouse, brown skirt—and Joan Willoughby was beside him. She had seen, through the dust, patches of the drama of the sidewalk, had heard more, and knew that the Parson had won his fight, better than if she, who had failed miserably, had tried to intercede. She read in the manner of Speck Ballentine a calm change, as though of suspended judgment, toward the gunman who had turned preacher. She took the Parson's hand in both of hers, squeezed it with trembling fingers.

"Thanks, Miss Joan. Would you mind handing the sheriff my guns?"

A smile of happiness curved her lips as she nodded and stooped.

Speck Ballentine moved a step forward. His mind had been working swiftly; this man might not have been the killer of Joe Stack—the other Granger Hume with the buckskin cape, the sombrero of the steeple crown and the starred boots was probably the slayer. This act alone told much. Ballentine spoke in husky tones:

"Never mind, Miss Joan. I reckon it's only polite to ask the Parson to put his pistols on again.

And it looks like we don't have any time to lose, to meet that party when they come."

He jerked his head sideways, in the direction of a sand cloud, darker than the rest, that crawled in a serpentine over the Toro range. Granger Hume had seen it, and the girl saw it now. The Parson reached, buckled on his belt with the guns.

"Yi-yip-pit-ty! War's over!" Bystanders were hurrying from across the street. "Three cheers for the Parson an' the sheriff!" They gave them. The preacher, eyes alert, watching the dark line on the range, turned to Joan with a quiet command. "Miss Joan, you run along; go into Don Alfredo's; it's open. Stay in the parsonage, till we come for you!"

Ballentine's dark eyes were on the girl; he nodded frowning assent. "Yes, Miss, I want to have a talk with you and the Parson soon as this is over with. You go." He saw that she shivered from the cold of the storm. She turned and hurried away without questioning. Ballentine heard a voice, looked to his left to see a youth with a rifle, scrutinizing him in bewilderment, probingly.

"Settled, Chick, for the time being. Glad you come; we'll need every gun, for something else. Rustlers. See how many shootin' irons you can scare up, son."

Three minutes later, before the White Man saloon, two tall, lean men doubly armed and doubly skilled with six-shooters scanned the dust-gray end

of the street. Six volunteers, including Lonnie Hazen and Jake Leach, less heavily armed, lurked behind them, awaiting the signal for battle. As the hazy dark cavalcade swept into the upper end of the street, the Parson stepped out from the sidewalk.

"Now what you goin' to do?" demanded Ballentine, shortly.

"Take 'em with their pistols on," grinned the Parson. "Especially that gang. It's Duffy Butler and Tumbleweed with the Walking X bunch from the Buttes; I counted on them reaching here first."

Guns were sheathed. Duffy burst in among them, pulling down his dust-protector, fairly toppling from the saddle.

"They're comin'—down the Cow crick trail!" he sang out, while his companions, four in number, clattered to a stop and pitched from their lathered mounts, ridden hard from Quemado. "We met Hip, Tramer an' Ramon with the pris'ners—figured we'd come right on an' decoy 'em till Hip gets the bunk house sealed up again. We'll have time to raise the whole village, with every gun!"

"Got plenty," cut in the Parson. "You boys lead your horses to the rear. Then we'll take 'em without wasting good lead."

The Parson led the way, while Speck Ballentine, grown morose and dubious, followed silently with the new arrivals, Chick Gearing, Lonnie Hazen and the five volunteer possemen, including Jake Leach.

They went around the side of the White Man's House and to the sand lot in the rear.

"How many have we got?" queried the Parson. Ballentine counted them. There were five from the Buttes, counting Duffy and Tumbleweed. Ballentine and the Parson made seven. Hazen's and Leach's volunteers swelled the total to thirteen.

"Onlucky," grunted Hazen. The young deputy came leading his pony. "I'm fourteen!" he grinned. Chick Gearing was a stranger whose identity had not yet been placed.

"He's my deputy," informed the sheriff. "No, I ain't runnin' this show." His lips twisted into a sardonic grimace. "I'm askin' Granger Hume to do it, bein' he specializes in bloodless battle since he turned preacher."

The Parson shot him a quizzical look, turned to Duffy. "You and Tumble take your bunch across the street, in Becker's office. Bust down the door —it won't matter. Stick there, until you hear a bottle break through the window, then come running and cut off any stragglers we haven't already corralled."

Wondering, Duffy Butler started with his four around the hotel and into the street. The Parson led the way into the rear door of the White Man's House. The eight armed men proceeded through the narrow hall in the Parson's wake, and into the saloon. "Better pull down that broken blind at the window. We won't light the lamps. Lock the

door—" The Parson cut off short, as a yell arose at the street window.

"They're comin'!" shouted Hazen, inside. "It's Duffy——"

Butler's voice came distinctly. "Found Becker hog-tied an' gagged! Brogan an' Gore done it, he said, robbed his safe, got twenty-five hundred dollars!"

"W-what? That's all right—go back, pronto! Brogan's caught, and we'll get every cent for Becker." The Parson was shouting through the window pane, blind pulled back.

"Jimminy!" exclaimed the excited puncher in the street. "They're comin' now! See their dust!" His face vanished from the window, and the Parson saw him bolting across the wide thoroughfare and back into Becker's office.

The Parson dropped the blind, held a hasty confab with Ballentine and Hazen, disposed his men about the saloon. Hazen's voice rose in a quavering, drowsy barroom song; even the Parson joined in, swelling the words that would not have been appropriate on an ordinary Sabbath day at his services in the Painted Pony:

"You're a better man that I am,
Gordon Gin!"

The throaty, out-of-tune noise continued, even after the sound reached them of clattering ponies drawing up before the saloon, even after the door shook with the husky thrust of many shoulders.

"Nary a soul on guard," boomed the voice of Bill Minter, between jams at the locked swinging doors. "Musta' got wind we was on the way an' took a handsome pasear to save their hides!"

"Uh huh!" The Parson recognized the gruff tones of the red-bearded outlaw, Gringo Charley. "Hold th' fort, Badger kid! In a minute more we bust 'er through!"

"*Verdad!*" sang out Luis Escobar. Cheers and groans rose drunkenly from the interior of the bar-room, between murderous wails of song. If any eye had searched through the cracks of the broken blind at the barred window they would have seen a picture of dawdling revelry within, men down on the floor, asleep at the tables, one or two staggering at the bar or swaying about in the dark room, tongues and throats the most active things about them.

"Now—all together!" It was the shout of the rustler Gournard. A crunching, thudding smash followed, and the swinging doors bounded open with a crashing of splinters. Bill Minter and Gringo Charley, the huskiest, lunged in together, followed by the jostling forms of Zig Tinley, Escobar, Legs Gournard and their half-dozen confederates, all save the one man left in the street as horse-guard. "Whoopie!" chortled Minter. "Come a-runnin', waddies—! Screechin' cougars!"

Someone inside had touched a match to the big wall oil lamp. Guns appeared from every angle in

the room, turned upon the Lazy H rescuers and the amazed Zig Tinley and Minter. Chick Gearing hurled a beer bottle through the window pane, carrying the broken blind with it.

But it was scarcely necessary for Duffy Butler and Tumbleweed Jones to bring their men, although they took speedy charge of the guard outside with the horses. When they reached the door to cut off escape, they found Minter and Gournard standing together with arms stretched toward the ceiling and behind them the remnant of Badger Brogan's rustlers in like attitude of surrender. Speck Ballentine, sheriff's badge plainly in view on his flannel shirt beneath open calfskin vest, gathered up the guns.

"Parson, you didn't waste any good lead." Ballentine passed out the captive six-shooters for more convenient handling. "Is that bunk house jail big enough to hold this cavvy with the others?"

"It sure is, with the connecting door opened into the other room, sheriff."

"Chick, son, you and as many others as you need ride with this herd and give 'em quarters until I call for 'em." Ballentine turned to the Parson, who beckoned him back to the doorway leading into the hotel.

"Ready," said Granger Hume, removing his guns, extending them. "I'm hankering to serve my time. Want me to go with the others to that bunk house jail?"

"Not yet," said Ballentine, slowly, resting his somber eyes on the preacher. "First we'll go down and have that talk with Miss Joan."

While the deputy, Tumbleweed, Duffy and Hazen took charge of Minter and his fellow renegades, Speck Ballentine and Granger Hume walked down toward the Painted Pony and the back room "parsonage."

CHAPTER XXXVI

IN THE PARSON'S STUDY

SUDDEN calm had come upon the late Sunday afternoon; the sand wind had died, or rested, an anomaly for that period of the day, when the equinoctial tempests were usually rising. An orange sun painted the range and the town, slanting against mesquite, cactus and amole, and exaggerating the low buildings with the prestige of immense, elongated, purple shadows.

The Jaramillo prisoners and the disloyal Minter and Tinley, against whom no specific charge had yet been thought of, were allowed the dignity of their saddles, and were plainly visible as they trailed northward with their guards toward the Walking X. Eli Becker, freed from his bonds and the torturous gag, had promptly mounted and joined Hazen and the others in the trek to the Carroll bunk house prison, bent on interviewing one Badger Brogan and one Jerry Gore concerning a sum of twenty-five hundred dollars. The Parson and Speck Ballen-

tine had walked without further comment to the Painted Pony pool hall. Since the front door had been closed by Don Alfredo they took the side entrance, the one leading to the "parsonage" of boarded walls and less directly to the main pool and billiard room, where, on the long wall benches, the male congregations had assembled once a week to hear the Parson's virile, straight-from-the-shoulder discourses.

Joan Willoughby had been waiting in feverish anxiety, in the range minister's study, where Don Alfredo had hastened to start a mesquite-root fire in the little hot-blast stove when he saw the ravages wrought by the storm in the girl's sensitive body. Not all those ravages, trembling fingers and nervous hands, and chilled, bloodless lips and cheeks, had been wrought by the storm.

She knew, from what had happened on the street near the White Man's saloon, that Speck Ballentine, in spite of all his dark rage and threats, had made good in the pledge he had originally taken not to use his guns; and she had given a promise to Ballentine—a promise that only the Parson's life would have induced her to make.

As to the threatened battle with the Lazy H rustlers under Minter she had had little doubt of the outcome, and she had remained in front of the Painted Pony long enough to see the arrival of Duffy Butler and Tumbleweed Jones with the force from Quemado Buttes. She had returned several

times to the front of the pool hall with Don Alfredo, had been there when the street milled with horsemen, and knew that the Jaramillo men had fallen into some sort of a trap. Then she had returned to the Parson's study to await developments, as Granger Hume and Speck Ballentine had ordered.

The Parson of Toro would go to prison, and that thought tortured her, but she was helpless—it was the Parson's will. That he was a big enough man to surmount even the disgrace of penal servitude she believed; a soul so unselfish and so noble in its devotion to ideals would retrieve this remarkable leader's position in society in the end.

Thoughts not wholly different from these as regards Ballentine and Joan, had claimed the mind of Granger Hume as he walked beside the silent sheriff to the door of the Painted Pony. Vividly he recalled the girl's words and her bargain with the Loma Grande officer. He had realized when he conquered the spirit to kill in the breast of his adversary that he was giving the square-shooting sheriff the right to claim the mistress of the Walking X. Bitter as was that realization, he stifled the groan in his heart; it was better that way. The Parson said no word to Ballentine even as they entered the Painted Pony.

He led the way into the crude parsonage, carrying in his hand the guns, holsters and cartridge belt which the sheriff had strangely, almost sullenly, refused to take from him—carried them he did not

know why, for he realized he was through with them forever. As the two men passed the genial Don Alfredo and pushed open the door to the back room, Joan Willoughby greeted them with a wan smile and tried to appear cheerful.

"I owe you two men everything. You saved the Walking X and rid Toro of the worst law-defying element Loma Grande County has ever known," she said, standing beside the Parson's small roll-top desk. "Judge Loftus will give thanks, for Mrs. Loftus told us how much he was losing through Brogan's coercion. So will Jes Mangel and Lonnie Hazen, the Neff boys and all the rest. I can't thank you too much." Her gaze lifted to the Parson, whose clean-cut features, level gray-blue eyes and lean, tall figure seemed, for the first time she had known him, ill at ease under the outward mask of dignity and courage.

"Miss Joan's been a brave girl," mused the range minister, "and under a strain that would try any man's soul, from the time her uncle was murdered through to today!" He spoke as though voicing thoughts for the benefit of the sheriff. "Mr. Ballentine has been a real man, every inch of the way."

The officer held silence, his solemn features excessively grave, his eyes brooding, as though seeing neither of them. When nothing further was said, he spoke, dryly:

"Not mentionin' the part played by Granger Hume."

"Chickens will come home to roost." The Parson laid his guns on a chair. "That's one thing I never talked much about, in my sermons. A man can't hide from himself. I thought I could wipe the slate clean, start all over again, under a new brand, and make amends. I'd done better if I'd started in Loma Grande, faced the music then, and built on a firm foundation."

He noted that Speck Ballentine had studiously avoided meeting the eyes of Joan Willoughby; yet the sheriff had brought him there, he had said, for the purpose of "having a talk" with Miss Joan. The Parson wondered at the officer's disinclination to address the girl. Ballentine continued his wide-focused, mournful gaze, until the silence became embarrassing. Joan herself had never been much for small talk, the Parson knew. Presently Ballentine pressed his hands deep into his pockets and turned abruptly on the preacher, fixing him with a searching look.

"Parson, you shot a man once named Gregor. Hombre that came into Loma Grande lookin' for you and Dad Walker. He found you, and it was plain self-defense, and there was no indictment."

The other nodded his head slowly, his brow wrinkling at memory of it.

"Then when Fanner Webb ran amuck and killed Charlie Adams at the Amigo dance-hall you went through his stream of lead and got him. There never was any trial, and that was plain shootin' of

a murderer and criminal, although you wasn't sworn as a deputy." The sheriff's eyes glinted and his voice snapped in sudden change. "Where was you the latter part of last month?"

The girl cried out: "What are you driving at? I told you——"

"In the Ladrones, on Silver creek, fishing," replied the Parson promptly.

"You wasn't near Loma Grande?"

"No. Ask Jes Mangel; he was with me." The Parson smiled ruefully.

"I told you—he didn't shoot Joe Stack!" exclaimed Joan. "The letter he brought me was the first he knew Stack was dead."

"I believe you both." Ballentine shrugged uneasily. "Now, what I'm gettin' at is this: You shot Gregor and you shot Fanner Webb, and no charge lodged. But you told those folks in the plaza this morning you were a fugitive and killer and wanted to give yourself up. *What was that crime?*"

The Parson's light eyes flickered, shot deep with pain. "It was Dad Walker," he said, and his gaze wavered, went pleadingly to Joan.

"Dad Walker." The sheriff repeated the words musingly, removed his hands from his pockets, fumbled at his heavy belt. "Is that the only crime you're surrenderin' for?"

"It's enough—enough!" exclaimed the other, feelingly. "And with Little Brazos serving time—I didn't know that, sheriff—or I'd have gone to

Loma Grande immediately and saved Little Brazos that sentence—on my word of honor! I want to go back now and save him every single day in jail I can."

Ballentine cleared his throat. "Little Brazos serving time, and you goin' back, to save him, I see it now." The officer turned and for the first time since entering the room met the large, sensitive eyes of Joan Willoughby. "Now I can talk to you," he said, in sharp, incisive tones. "Miss Joan, you're in love with this man."

The girl bit her lip, struggled to hold her composure, did not reply.

"Silence is assent."

"It's untrue!" she faltered. "I haven't assented. Oh, how dare you speak to me like this!" Her weakened body tensed, straightened, and her intelligent face suddenly flamed, uprising fires leaping from her eyes. "It's unfair—cowardly—the act of a brute!" Her hands clutched the edge of the desk. "Oh, why do you make it so hard for me, when you and I are to be married?"

CHAPTER XXXVII

SONG OF BIRDS

SPECK BALLENTINE'S mournful mouth opened wide, in a doleful grin. The Parson met his scrutiny with a new hostility, wanting to say something in rebuke; but the subject were better quickly forgotten, and he held his peace. Ballentine strode about the room, came to a stop again before his rival.

"So you want to get Little Brazos out of jail, eh?" He slowly rolled a cigarette. "Well, he's out."

"Out!"

"Out near a year ago, his time up. He'd been hanged, if it wasn't everybody knew he didn't do it. He was sentenced on general principles, a bad hombre and a dangerous kid that Loma Grande folks wanted to put where he'd tame down and reform. Which he did. He's a cowman now, runnin' his own brand on the Jaramillo, and the chief reason Badger Brogan left that country. If Loma Grande

had corralled you, Granger Hume, you'd have fared worse!" The sheriff's long face set hard.

"I reckon so," assented the Parson grimly, "and maybe rightly, even though shooting Dad Walker was farthest from my thoughts."

"Yes, they'd have cinched you for ten years likely," said Ballentine, slowly.

"Or hanged me, probably, at that time." The Parson's light eyes wavered, went to the floor.

"No, they wouldn't hardly have done that, because they knew you didn't kill him, Parson."

Silence. Three pairs of eyes shifted focus, one to the other. Joan Willoughby's lips opened, closed without uttering the cry of surprise and joy that had formed. The range minister's questioning look caused the sheriff to answer seriously:

"Granger Hume's bullet which went into Dad Walker's shoulder, wouldn't have killed him. Light was poor, and him zig-zaggin'. The ball that took him went into his back and through the heart, Parson."

"During that first exchange of shots," murmured the other, incredulously. "Whose——?"

"Carl Gains' bullet did it. He was with us. Knew it, others knew it, when Little Brazos was sentenced. But you know the sentiment there then, and how it was counted it would be doin' the kid a real good turn to sober him for a spell. Granger Hume disappeared, and Loma Grande considered it good riddance."

The Parson nodded, dared not look squarely at Joan Willoughby, whose eyes were wide and whose scarcely audible whisper of delight—" not guilty "—smote him deeply. Speck Ballentine raised a finger accusingly at the girl.

" Now I'll talk to *you!*" he exclaimed, in tones intense with earnestness. " I'm not a fool, even if I don't understand a lot about women. I'm not plumb blind, not dumb enough not to know when I'm a loser. And I'm not the kind to take something that's written in the bond even if I did earn it, which I didn't, when that something cain't be given. " His somber eyes were level and steady enough on the girl now.

" What—what are you saying? " she asked, pleadingly. " I don't believe the Parson will want to hear—hear things between you and me. He isn't interested—now. " Her hands were on the desk again, fingers moving nervously.

" Oh, yes, he is! You let me run this show, Miss Joan. I was sayin' that I'm a loser, and I know it. The woman never lived, Miss Joan, that would plead like you did for a man's life, and offer to take another to save him, without bein' plumb loco in love with one of them. I saw it from the first, fought against it, lost my head in a fit of insane anger. But I've cooled down, thought it out. You couldn't care for me, Miss Joan, even if I took you. I'm too much of a man, I hope, to take what cain't be given. No, don't try to stop me! You've got to

listen! I'd refuse you now, Miss Joan, because I think too much of you to ask it. This is something bigger than all of us, beyond our wills. It's the heart, not the brain, that does such things. Your heart's made a wise and noble choice. That's all—I've got a heap of business to look after." Speck Ballentine turned toward the door.

The Parson halted him. "Mister Ballentine, I'm undeserving, and you presume too much! We'd better let the lady say a word—just one word, don't you think, about a thing like this! If there ever was a man deserving of a woman, it's Speck Ballentine, and I'm praying she knows her own heart when she says she's going to marry you!"

"There ain't any choice!" snapped the sheriff. "She's made it. Can't you see she's nigh sick over this thing now—look at her. Let's go over and get a drink!"

"Don't!" The girl, suddenly calm, stepped between them. "Let us go to the Walking X. It's near dark, and Miss Leffenwell will have supper ready and waiting!" She tried to laugh, succeeded better than she knew. "Then there will be all of those prisoners to look after and feed before they start for Loma Grande."

"That will be great," assented the Parson, enthusiastically. "I reckon anything will be good, after a fellow's thought he would be spending months and years in jail. Don't you think so, sheriff?"

"Yeah." A smile lit the long face. "I reckon I'm man enough to be the best friend of a girl like Joan, even if I've got to step aside for a better. Don't say you ain't!" he snapped again. "You beat me in Loma Grande, Granger Hume; you beat me here—two ways. Let's go!"

They hurried down the street, found their horses, and cut north toward the Walking X, Joan wearing the man's coat that Don Alfredo had flung about her shoulders when she came into the Painted Pony in the afternoon. Half way out they halted for a few moments to gaze toward Pine Shadow Spring, a black blotch in the semi-darkness enshrouding Cow creek.

"There's where Dick and Soapy Johnson were murdered." The Parson pointed with his pipe stem. Then, for the first time, Speck Ballentine heard the full account of the crime.

"What's the nature of the evidence?" asked the sheriff.

"Jake Leach will testify that Badger Brogan, Jerry Gore and Luis Escobar left their rooms that night. Then there is the letter of Dick Carroll, returned after being spied upon, showing the motive. I'll go into that later. And Tumbleweed Jones will have something to say in the way of a surprise, in which a cowboy botanist will show he can be of use sometimes even in collecting desert range weeds. That's what he was doing when you met him at Monte Largo, sheriff!"

Ballentine grinned. "Yeah, and we ran across something else at Monte Largo that will interest Miss Joan and the other owners hereabouts. Dick Carroll's rustled cows are holed up there. We'll get 'em on the way over, if she'll furnish the hands to drive 'em back."

"There'll be plenty of volunteers for that!"

They rode ahead, reached the ranch after dark, and found Miss Leffenwell had not neglected to have a large supper in course of preparation, aided by Inocencia, an act prompted by the dramatic arrival of Hipkins, Tramer and Seres, and later by the second party, Duffy Butler, Tumbleweed, Gearing, Hazen and their prisoners, not to mention Eli Becker. The captives had been fed in the bunk house, Becker had recovered his money, and the hungry possemen were awaiting the appearance of Ballentine and the Parson with Miss Joan as the signal for the dinner call, Inocencia's sweet-toned triangle.

"They'll eat you out of house and home, Miss Joan," asserted the sheriff. "Enough to bankrupt the county, 'most, feeding that Jaramillo outfit. We'll have to move 'em first thing in the morning. Parson, I'd like you to go along, as deputy."

"My guns are off for good," declared the preacher, looking at Joan, who had taken the weapons again, he did not know where. "Gives me gun fever, almost, to think of ever using them again."

"Dunno," Ballentine's mouth twisted into a sardonic smile. "Some men will get that way, after a shootin'—them that have fine stuff in 'em. Others have their appetite whetted. It's nothin' against a man's past, I reckon. The desert's a hard country, and it's taken guns to put down guns."

"But times are changing."

"Yeah; still, all that survives on the desert is armored—cactus and its spines to daggered amole and the clawed mesquite."

"Men ain't cactus." The Parson's earnest eyes went to Joan for approbation.

"Still, even the Mescalero rose and the Century Plant have their thorns, and the prickly pear rides heeled. Canaries don't sing where the butcher-birds spike their carcasses on the bayonets of the yucca. When's the dinner-bell ring?"

Joan laughed. The Parson was serious. "That's the only respect in which man differs from the law of the fang—in his humanity, his sympathy, his love and understanding. Man's not a chollo bur, or viper."

"I reckon you win. You'll have plenty time to talk about it—to Joan. But Speck Ballentine keeps his guns."

Granger Hume, he of the enviable fame in the use of the pistols, smiled. "I reckon it's necessary with a peace officer like you, sheriff. My point is that I've been preaching straight these last few years in Toro, about dueling—when you consider

that I might have killed you there in the street, the whitest man that ever lived."

"Not that bad," grunted Ballentine. "But I know you are right, when I consider what I would have done to you in Toro this afternoon if you hadn't beaten me to the guns."

They talked more after supper of biscuit, venison, beef, potatoes and jams, discussing the events of the recent weeks and the prospects for the future on the range. Miss Leffenwell was in high spirits. "Now we'll have a real church, after all, with music, and singing, and women! Joan is just crazy to sing in the Parson's choir." This friendly dig at the girl brought the color back to her cheeks, brought understanding smiles to many of those present, and Speck Ballentine wandered out to look after the prisoners and have a word with his youthful deputy.

On Joan's insistence that the Parson must take up the foremanship again, at least temporarily, until church duties should call him from the Walking X for good, he went out to the office room to examine the rope in the trunk, on which Tumbleweed Jones' testimony was to be based. He found it where he had placed it more than a week before. Returning again he encountered Miss Leffenwell's cheery talk about enlarged church activities for Toro:

"We may not need a church any more—the folks that are left are so good!"

He looked for Joan; she was not with the company in the living room. Becker and one or two others had returned to town. The Parson strolled again to Dick Carroll's old office.

A golden moon, in a bright starlit sky that had succeeded the sand storm, flooded into the east corner window, made weird patterns over the grass rug that covered the floor. The Parson did not know exactly why he had gone to the secluded barren room, unless it was in the vague hope that Joan might follow him there to say a word about the foremanship. He went to the north window, gazed out on the distant, dark Ladrones, fringed with silver against the deeper sky. The rich vibrant notes of mocking birds dropped from somewhere in the night, and he heard a footstep at the half-opened door. The man's heart missed a beat as he went to her in the glow of the white-gold orb in the southeastern heavens.

"You must advise me, as foreman," she said, simply, her velvet eyes meeting his glowingly. "I want you to tell me honestly whether I should marry Speck Ballentine—or you?"

"But why ask me? I'd marry him, if I were you."

"You have been my advisor, ever since I came to the Walking X. If I should marry him, I wouldn't have your counsel then."

"Oh, you'd get along. Go marry him. He's a prince, every inch a man."

She drew herself to him suddenly, kissed him. "Didn't you hear Speck Ballentine say that he wouldn't have me, Parson John?"

"Querida! Querida!"

Outside the night birds continued to sing in the ranch yard trees.

(THE END)